

Moth Night is After my Bedtime!



Early to bed early to rise, as the saying goes, but every once in a while it is worth changing routine to see what you might be missing.

One of the things I enjoy most about environmental education, is getting people outside to appreciate some really amazing things that are all around us, but rarely seen.

As you can see from the pictures, the moths that are around in mid-summer, are quite striking. The variety is incredible and, unlike butterflies, moths are usually happy to land on you and crawl on you – which many children love, and makes for some great photos.

Moths, of course, can't exist without the right habitat – which means nectar producing plants for those that need to feed, and also flowers, grasses, vines and trees which the caterpillars can eat.

The program began at 8pm with a talk by Rachel Mackow about native plants. This is plants that have co-evolved here in the North-East, along with the animals and insects that use them.



Rachel, along with Jared Rosenbaum, runs Wild Ridge Plants, a nursery dedicated to growing native plants.

Our entomologist for the evening, Blaine Rothausser, also provided an inspiring presentation about the ecology of moths, so we could all understand what we were looking at, as well as how to encourage and protect them.

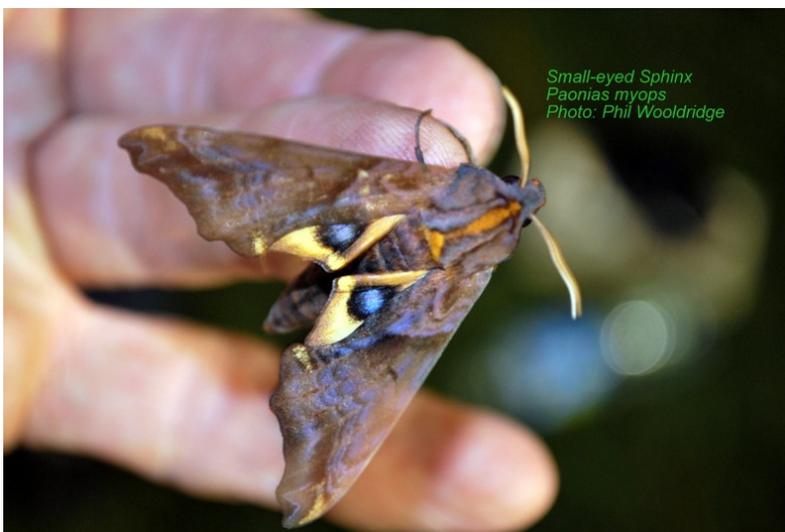
Around 10:00PM we walked up the slope to the recreation field where two 1,000 Watt mercury-vapor lamps were already attracting insects to the area. Some moths are attracted to lights, as anyone with an outside light already knows. When it comes to trying to see what moth species are around, the bigger the light the better. Mercury vapor generates light that moths find particularly alluring.

Around the lights we had a horseshoe of painter's tarps. These provided a surface for the moths to land on and also placed them at a convenient height for viewing and photography. As Blaine is fond of saying, "Moth watching is addictive," and so it was that come 12:30 AM I was still rushing to see, whenever anybody spotted a new moth.

By the time I went home around 1:00AM, Blaine and Steve had documented nearly 120 species of moth. When you compare that to going out in the daytime and looking at butterflies, it is about 20 times the variety that you would see in any given yard, or even in a nature reserve.



Common looper
Autographa precationis
Photo: Phil Wooldridge



Small-eyed Sphinx
Paonias myops
Photo: Phil Wooldridge

Moths are incredibly diverse and abundant and we don't know all that much about them. Even the *Peterson Field Guide to Moths* lists some species with unknown hosts, which means nobody has yet figured out what the caterpillars eat; yet we see the moths.

And about that title: “Moth Night is Past my Bedtime.”

When you're looking at moths, the later you stay, the more you see. In fact, certain species of moths become active at different times. When I called it a night, Blaine and Steve Klobier were still going strong and seemed prepared to spend several more hours identifying what came in.

Liberty Township is a special place, with diverse habitats and a healthy selection of native plants. My hope is that events like this, which reveal the stunning variety of animals and insects around us, will help us appreciate what we have, and work to sustain it for the future.

Phil Wooldridge
Liberty Township Environmental Commission

Special thanks to:

Liberty Township Environmental Commission, especially Shannon Schaaf, Dan Kurela, Helen Danitz, Eileen Greason, Tom Webster.

Our presenters: Blaine Rothhouser, Rachel Mackow.

Volunteers from Liberty, Knowlton, Mansfield, Belvidere, Stroudsburg: Karen Lund, Jane Bullis, Ruth Pante, Jim McMekin, Elaine Drazek, Steve Klobier, Lynn Gilmore.

Community Service Volunteers that assisted with parking: James, JT, Erin, Dawn.

I'm sure I've missed at least one person – many thanks anyway :-)

