

Insects to liven up winter days

by Michael Pollock

The pines sigh in blustery winter winds and the fields are sere and brown, making an encounter with charismatic insects like butterflies and locusts seem unlikely, but a surprising number of interesting bugs come out on mild or even cool winter days. Lepidopterans like luna moths and black swallowtails can appear during warm spells in December, probably too early, but others hibernate and normally take flight during warm spells. Some moths somehow fly even on frigid evenings. Ladybugs and stinkbugs also hibernate as adults, frequently in buildings, while large locusts fly in woods on warm afternoons.

In the fall, I observed butterflies, all in the brushfoot family, sipping fluid bubbling out of a sick white oak, jockeying with giant hornets and male horse flies. As the season got colder, the large, gliding red-spotted purples of summer vanished and before the first frost the red admirals, with brilliant red bars and white spots on a black background, were gone too. With these species there were orange butterflies with jagged wings, question marks and maybe also Eastern commas, and they continued to visit the tree as it went dormant in November. A big mourning cloak also appeared, a spectacular butterfly made more special by its rarity. Mourning cloaks also hibernate, but I usually see them in spring, rather than fall, when question marks are common.

Question marks and commas are similarly colored anglewings, with dark orange and brown wings with black spots. The undersides are brown for camouflage and their names come from silvery punctuation marks in the center of their hindwings. Question marks seem to be most common and are larger. Their summer form has wings edged with neon purple. Both butterflies have atypical tastes, seeking out foods like sap, overripe persimmons, and dung. They might occasionally visit flowers, but I don't think I've ever seen one drink nectar. Males establish territories, rather than randomly searching for



females. Their spiny caterpillars eat similar things, such as nettles, false nettles, hops (thus question mark caterpillars have been called hop merchants), and elms. These species can hibernate or migrate to escape winter weather, making them among the first butterflies in spring.

Mourning cloaks, Camberwell beauties in the UK, are large butterflies, especially compared to the generally small butterflies of spring. They are unmistakable, having black or dark brown wings edged with blue spots and a yellow margin, worn to cream-colored with age. Like anglewings, they like to perch head down on tree trunks, presumably to confuse predators. I rarely see adults eating, but they go for the same foods as the anglewings, while the caterpillars feed in groups on plants like willows, elms, and hackberries. The adults aestivate through summer heat and hibernate or migrate in winter, living up to 11 months, even longer than the monarchs that winter in Mexico. I often encounter male mourning cloaks as they patrol territories in forest glades or along gravel roads in the spring. These butterflies can be flighty and have to be stalked slowly.

The moths of winter are less spectacular, but somehow fly even in 40–30 degree weather, though it is an open question whether they came out of hibernation or metamorphosed too early. I haven't been able to identify the most common moth, so I call it a winter moth for now. It could be in the inchworm family and is small and medium gray, with a few broken black and white lines. I

Pictured are a red admiral, above, and a question mark.

PHOTOS BY MICHAEL POLLOCK

see them at my porch lights in winter and early spring. Some ashen moths in the inchworm family come out in winter, but they are most abundant in spring, when their caterpillars feed on emerging tree leaves. These geometers rest with their long wings held flat, revealing complex black lines, circles, and shading against a pale gray or brownish background. Some of their names are very plain – you could see a porcelain gray or large purplish gray, but they are still pretty insects. I've found inchworm caterpillars on hollies even when the ground beneath was frozen solid.

Another surprising insect to liven up winter woods are grasshoppers. Many times I've walked through a bare forest on a sunny afternoon and big grasshoppers flew up from the leaf litter to the safety of tree trunks. These are American bird grasshoppers (*Schistocerca americana*), a large species attractively spotted in dun, black, and white. They overwinter as adults and may migrate in summer to escape the heat.

A few insects escape winter cold by joining us indoors, and some of these uninvited house guests we've inflicted on ourselves. On warm days in late fall, crowds of ladybugs, actually beetles, not true bugs, congregate on sunlit walls and look for warm crevices. These are probably multi-colored Asian lady beetles (*Harmonia axyridis*), a species with very variable coloration, introduced for pest control and now causing domestic inconvenience, damage to grapes, and competition for native ladybugs. The famous or infamous brown marmorated stinkbug (*Halyomorpha halys*) is an introduced true bug known for invading buildings. Other introduced and native stinkbugs also hibernate, but less often indoors.

If you would like to learn more, online guides are available at www.butterfliesandmoths.org and www.bugguide.net.

Michael Pollock is a freelance writer living in southern Durham who founded Northeast Creek Stream Watch. He studied biology and anthropology at UNC and has an interest in Fortean phenomena.



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