

MONTEREY NEWS



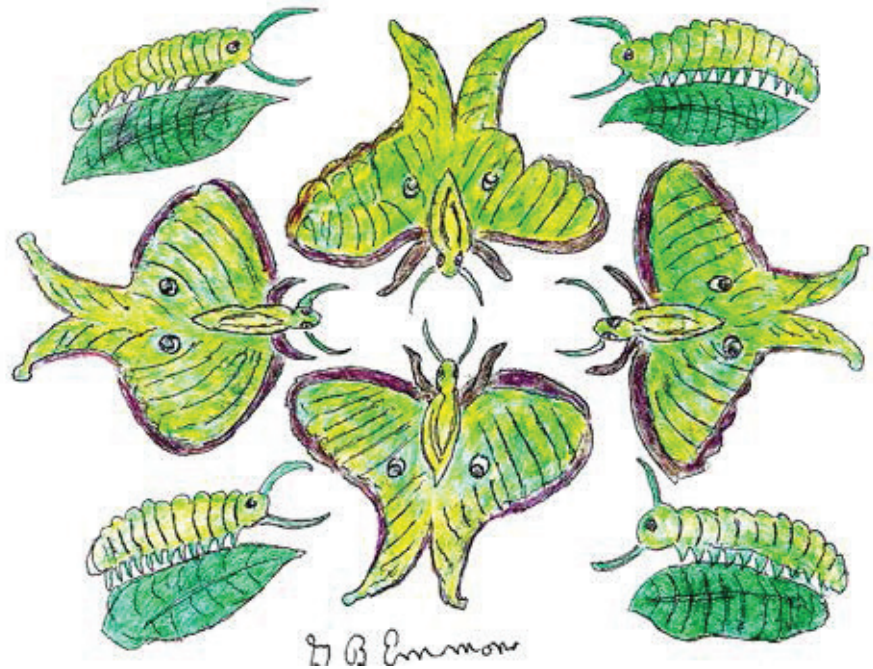
September 2022
Est. 1970 Vol. LII • Number 9

Luna Moths

In 1987 the luna moth was chosen as the most beautiful moth in America and selected to appear on a United States postage stamp (below). More recently it was on the front cover of *National Geographic's 2016 Pocket Guide to Insects of North America*. It is also the largest lime-green moth, with a wingspan of five inches or more and thus easy to identify, making it a very popular species to observe.

Luna moths live in the eastern half of North America, as far north as Saskatchewan in Canada, south to Texas, and in the east from Nova Scotia as far south as Florida. My illustration of the moths also shows four caterpillars, feeding on green leaves representing walnut, hickory, and birch leaves, known to be a favored food source in that stage of their development. The continental luna moth population is currently in decline because of deforestation of their habitat, pesticide use, as well as changing land use to more residential, business, or recreational environments not conducive to reproduction.

While both the males and females have bushy antennae, the male has a much more noticeable, bushier antenna to detect the pheromones of prospective females prepared to mate. Once he finishes mating with one female, he flies on to find as many other females as possible. Once she has mated, she begins laying up to six hundred small round eggs. Luna moths in New England only lay one brood, but in the south they may lay up to three. The adult moths only live for a couple of weeks, solely for the



purpose of mating. They have only vestigial mouth parts and no digestive tract, so they don't forage for nutrition.

In 1758 when the Swedish botanist, Carl von Linné (Latinized to Linnaeus) developed his classification system for plants and then animals, he named the moth *Actias luna*. (Luna for the moth's moon-like spots.) Subsequently, it is often mislabeled as an American moon moth. Over the years, philosophers, writing about the luna moth, express the moth's longing to capture the glow

of a candle in its wings and fly away with it to light up eternal darkness as a character metaphor for achieving impossible dreams.

In my opinion, the luna moth is very worthy to be recognized. I believe in the Native American philosophy, "Every living creature on earth is sacred, even the smallest blade of grass." Carrying the "moon" spots leads many to believe it is a celestially-motivated spirit of earthly consequence. It is worthy of our recognition and appreciation.

— George B. Emmons

