



A Luminous Object of Wonder: *The Luna Moth*

WRITTEN BY SAM SCHUNK
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Posed gracefully with its eye-catching lime-green wings fully extended, the luna moth (*Actias luna*) is truly a thing of beauty. When you understand the ephemeral nature of this delicate creature, catching a glimpse of this winged wonder may become all the more magical to you.

Just as the phases of the moon last only a few days, the moth named for that celestial orb has a similarly short span, as it lives for about a week. The luna begins its life as a very hungry caterpillar that feasts upon the leaves of hickory, paper birch, sumac, sweet gum, and walnut trees. After about a month of eating these plants, the caterpillar builds a cocoon that becomes its home for about three weeks.

After its metamorphosis is complete, the striking moth emerges from its cocoon, typically in the morning hours since this allows the insect time to expand and dry its wings prior to the evening

flight period. From a distance, the unmistakable first impression is that the luna moth is a beautiful lime green in coloration; however, when you look more closely, other hues and patterns will come to light. Noted for its sizable wingspan of about three to four inches, the luna's broad wings terminate in delicate tail streamers. The moth's name, luna, is derived from the distinctive moon-shaped dots on its fore- and hindwings, round spots that serve an important function: helping the insect to protect itself from predators. When the luna feels endangered by a bat, for instance, it will spin its wingtips in circles, which disorients the threatening creature long enough for the moth to be able to make its getaway.

One of the largest moths in North America, the luna is only found on that continent, where it prefers forested regions that put it in closer proximity to its food sources. While lunas are easier to catch a glimpse of in the Eastern United States, they are less frequently observed in Southern Canada and in the northern states



because, in those areas, only a single generation of lunas emerges annually. Throughout the southern parts of the continent, however, three or more generations, which tend to be smaller, are typical each year. It's not uncommon to find these exotic beauties every month of the year in Florida and Louisiana. In areas where multiple generations occur, those that emerge in the spring tend to be deeper green with reddish-purple wing margins while those that live later in the year are more yellowish with the same shade on the edges of their wings.

While luna antennae are quadripectinate, meaning comb-like on four sides, inspecting these in more detail can help you to determine the sex of a particular moth. Males tend to have larger, wider ones with a texture that's often described as "feathery." The coloration is another important clue, since male antennae appear to be yellowish-green and, on females, they tend to be blue-green.

Interestingly—and this also helps to explain its limited longevity—the insect does not eat during this phase of its life because it lacks a mouth and digestive system. Instead, the winged wonder spends its time seeking out a mate and tending to the continuation of its species. Strong flyers, male lunas may disperse over relatively long distances, so females release a powerful sex-attractant pheromone that helps to attract males. Mating usually takes place during the first few hours after midnight. The following evening, the females start the process of laying 400 to 600 eggs, either singly or in small clusters of about 4 to 7, which they place on the underside of leaves. These eggs incubate for 8-13 days and then the life cycle begins once again.

Considered by many authorities to be the most beautiful moth in North America, it's not surprising that this winged wonder has been featured on a first-class U.S. postage stamp and selected as the ideal insect to grace the cover of field guides. Get to know the luna moth, and you'll soon find it is a source of inspiration and delight.

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