



My Drift

Title: Black Witch Moth

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The Black Witch Moth is found in the southern United States (including Hawaii), down to Brazil in South America. The folklore surrounding the Black Witch Moth, like the moth itself, is all over the map. Here are some examples:

- In Mexico they are known as “mariposa de la muerte,” which means the “butterfly of death”. Many people there believe if a Black Witch Moth enters the home of someone who is ill, the person will die.
- In Central American folklore, the Black Witch Moth usually represents death or misfortune, especially if it enters your house.

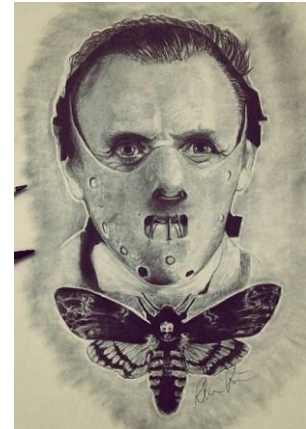
The folklore associations aren’t all bad. Here are some examples where the Black Witch Moth symbolizes something good or at least not death:

- In Hawaiian mythology, though associated with death, it has a happier note in that the Black Witch Moth is an embodiment of a dead family member’s soul returning to say goodbye or to watch over you.
- Interestingly, in the Caribbean and parts of Texas, the Black Witch Moth is known as the “Money Moth”. If it visits your home and roosts over your door, you are likely to come into some cash like winning the lottery.

Did you see the movie “Silence of the Lambs”? I think it is a great movie and have watched it several times.

So anyway, do you remember the fact that serial killer Hannibal Lechter inserted cocoons of Black Witch Moths into the mouths of his victims as a weird gesture of transformation?

The moth on the movie poster is a Death's-head hawkmoth, but the actual cocoon was that of a Black Witch Moth.



Hannibal Lechter

The point here is the fact that the Black Witch Moth is generally associated with death in some form.

Well, the reason I became interested in moths is because of a big black moth that has come to our house three times during the Christmas 2020 holidays. The moth never entered our home but stayed in the patio and carport area during the daylight hours. Here is a picture I took of the moth on the inside roof of our carport:



Black Witch Moth at our house

Since I have heard stories about big black moths symbolizing the souls of dead people, I did some research on moths and decided to write this article about them.

The last time I can remember seeing a big black moth at our house was 3 years ago after our beloved dog Monty died, and we had got our new puppy we named Apache. My wife believed that the moth represented the soul of Monty returning home to provide some guidance for Apache. Come to think about it, they do act a lot alike. You do believe that dogs have a soul – don't you?



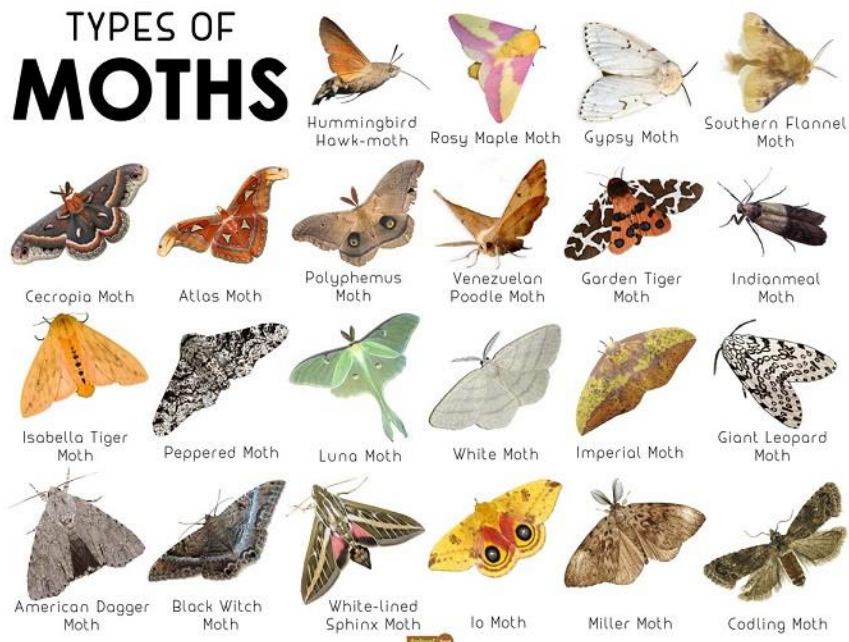
Monty



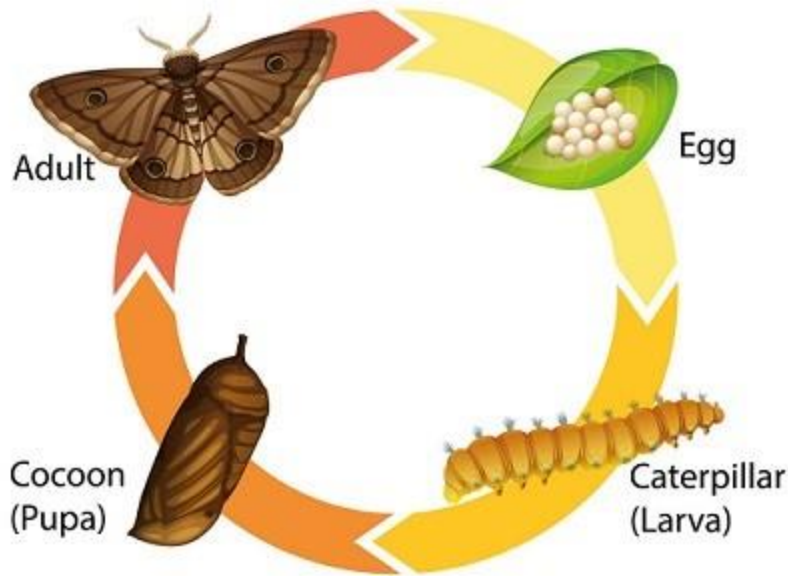
Apache

Let's learn a few more things about moths and especially the Black Witch Moth.

Moths are a group of insects that includes all members of the order Lepidoptera that are not butterflies, with moths making up the vast majority of the order. There are thought to be approximately 160,000 species of moths versus 17,500 species of butterflies. Here are a few of the more popular moths:



Life Cycle of a Moth



All members of the order Lepidoptera, the butterflies and moths, progress through a four-stage life cycle, or complete metamorphosis. Each stage—egg, larva, pupa, and adult—serves a purpose in the insect's development and life.

Egg or Embryonic Stage

Once a female moth has mated with a male of the same species, the female will deposit her fertilized eggs, usually on plants that will serve as food for her offspring. This marks the beginning of the life cycle. The length of time required for the eggs to hatch is dependent on the species, as well as environmental factors. For the Black Witch it is 5 or 6 days.



Black Witch Moth Eggs

Caterpillar or Larva Stage

Once development within the egg is completed, a caterpillar hatches from the egg. In most cases, the first meal the caterpillar eats will be its own eggshell, from which it gains essential nutrients. From then on, the caterpillar feeds voraciously on its host plant. Once it grows too big for its cuticle, it must shed or molt. The caterpillar may take a break from eating as it prepares to molt. The caterpillar (larva) continues this cycle—eat, poop, molt, eat, poop, molt—until the black witch caterpillar reaches a length of 2.5 to 3 inches and is ready to pupate. A pupa is the life stage of a moth where it spins a cocoon.



Black Witch Caterpillar (Larva)

Caterpillars readying for pupation often wander from their host plants, in search of a safe place for the next stage of their lives. Once a suitable site is found, the caterpillar forms a pupal skin, which is thick and strong, and sheds its final larval cuticle.

Cocoon or Pupal Stage

During the pupal stage, the most dramatic transformation occurs. Traditionally, this stage has been referred to as a resting stage, but the insect is far from at rest. The pupa does not feed during this time, nor can it move. Moths in this stage are in cocoons.



Black Witch Cocoon (Pupa)

Within the cocoon or pupal case, most of the caterpillar body breaks down through a process called histolysis. Special groups of transformative cells, which remained hidden and inert during the larval stage, now become the directors of the body's reconstruction. These cell groups initiate biochemical processes which transform the deconstructed caterpillar into a viable moth. This process is called histogenesis. Once the metamorphosis within the pupal case is completed, the moth will remain at rest until the appropriate trigger signals the time to emerge from the cocoon as an adult moth.

Adult or Imago Stage

The adult, also called the imago, emerges from its pupal cuticle with a swollen abdomen and shriveled wings. For the first few hours of its adult life, the moth will pump hemolymph into the veins in its wings to expand them. The waste products of metamorphosis, a reddish liquid called meconium, will be discharged from the anus. Once its wings are fully dried and expanded, the adult moth can fly in search of a mate. Mated females lay their fertilized eggs on appropriate host plants, beginning the life cycle anew. The total adult life stage lasts three to four weeks for the Black Witch Moth.



Adult Black Witch Moths (Male and Female)

More information about the Black Witch Moth

- Like virtually all moths, the adult Black Witch flies mostly at night, attracted to the nectar of flowers, the juices of fallen fruit or the sap of a legume plant. It rests during the day, oftentimes on the walls or under the eaves of entranceways, porches, or garages.



Moths Fly at Night



- Unlike the butterflies that are colorful and delicate nymphs of the daylight hours, the moths like the Witch Moth are drab spirits of the night and often recall humankind's mysterious and darker side.
- The Black Witch Moth caterpillar prefers Cassia and Cat's Claw plants. Adults feed on overripe fruit, especially bananas, legumes, and acacia leaves.

- **Black Witch Moths are perfectly harmless, not an agricultural pest, and have no teeth or stingers. Make that physically harmless but there is the folklore where the Black Witch Moth can represent death or misfortune.**
- **The intriguing Black Witch Moth, sometimes known as “the bat moth” resembles a bat in size and shape and with a seven-inch wingspan is the largest moth in North America. The female is a little larger than the male.**



Witch Moth in a Human Hand

Key Differences between a Moth and a Butterfly

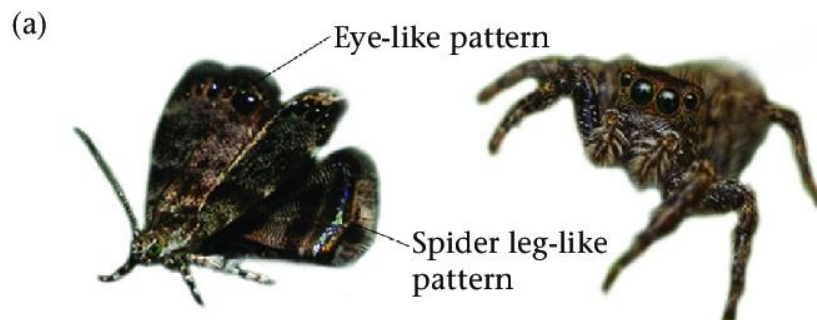
Moth	Butterfly
	
Active at night (nocturnal)	Active during the day (diurnal)
Dull colors	Bright colors
Wings rest at their sides	Wings rest together and upright
Feathered or pointed antennae	Straight and clubbed antennae
Thick body	Thin body

Some interesting facts about moths in general

The word "moth" may conjure up images of drab brown insects sticking to your screen door on a summer night. But there's much more to these mostly nocturnal (night) fliers than meets the eye.

Not only are moths extraordinarily diverse in color, shape and size, they also offer a huge array of ecological benefits, from pollinating plants to feeding birds, bats and even people around the globe. Here are some fascinating facts about these misunderstood insects:

1. Moths make great mimics. Some moths are notorious for their ability to impersonate other animals. To avoid being eaten, some moths have evolved to look like less palatable insects, such as wasps, tarantulas, and the praying mantis. Some moths even mimic bird droppings.



Moth Mimics a Tarantulas Spider

2. Moths are important pollinators.
While some moths, particularly caterpillars such as the corn earworm, are major agricultural pests, many others are important pollinators. Their hairy bodies make moths great pollinators — they pick up pollen from any flower they land on.



Moth Pollinating Plants

3. Many adult moths don't eat.
While some moths suck nectar, others don't eat at all. The adult female Luna Moth, for instance, doesn't even have a mouth. After it emerges from its cocoon, it only lives for about a week. Its sole mission in life is to mate and lay eggs.



Luna Moth

- 4. A male moth can smell a female more than 7 miles away.**

Though they lack noses, moths are expert sniffers. They detect odor molecules using their antennae instead of through nostrils. Male Giant Silkworm (Furry) Moths have elaborate feather-shaped antennae with hairlike scent receptors that allow them to detect a single molecule of a female moth's sex hormone from 7 miles away.



Furry Moth

- 5. They are important food for many animals.**

Not only do birds and bats consume moths at every stage of the insect's life cycle, so do lizards, small rodents, skunks and even bears. Other insects, including hornets and ants, prey on moth caterpillars, and both spiders and beetles feed on moth pupae tucked away in their cocoons.

- 6. Moths may be the next superfood for humans.**

In some parts of the world, moths are a major food source for people, too. More than 90 percent of people in several African countries like the Congo eat various insects including moths and butterfly caterpillars. Caterpillars are packed with protein and healthy fats, and research shows that 100 grams of these insects provides more than 100 percent of the daily requirement of some vital minerals, such as potassium, calcium, zinc, and iron.



Market in Africa with lots of Insects for Sale



How about a nice lunch of Caterpillars and Grasshoppers? No thanks!

- 7. Moths evolved long before butterflies, with fossils having been found that may be 190 million years old.**

8. **A moth's brain is smaller than a pinhead. But there's a lot going on inside. Scientists believe what happens in a moth's brain is not so different from what happens in the human brain.**
9. **What is the fastest flying insect? While the Spurge Hawk Moth (also known as the Hummingbird Moth) has been clocked at an impressive 33.7 miles per hour, it is just the second-fastest flying insect on record. The title of fastest flying insect belongs to the dragonfly, which darts and spins and dives at a record 35 miles per hour.**



Spurge Hawk Moth



Dragonfly

10. **Like all animal heads, the head of a butterfly or moth contains the feeding organs and the major sense organs. The head typically consists of two antennae, two compound eyes, two sensory appendages, and a long proboscis (mouth) to attain its food.**
11. **Some Moths Migrate. Everyone loves migrating butterflies, like the famous long-distance flights of the North American Monarchs. But nobody gives props to the many moths that also migrate, perhaps because they fly at night. Moths tend to migrate for practical reasons, like to find a better food supply, or to avoid uncomfortably hot and dry weather.**
12. **Most moths are attracted to a light source at night. Others might not come to lights but can't resist a mixture of fermenting sweets like a mix of ripe bananas, molasses, and beer.**
13. **Why do moths die so easily? Moths can die for many reasons like running out of food or getting old and exhausted. Moths are also food for lots of different types of animals, like bats and owls. Moths lay lots of eggs to make sure that there are lots more moths to replace them after they die. Most moths only live for a few weeks.**

14. Moths aren't just the dull brown cousins of our beloved butterflies. They come in all shapes, sizes, and colors. Here are some colorful moths:



Nature Patch Moth



Cecropia Silk Moth



Achemon Sphinx Moth



Harlequin Moth



Blue Morpho Moth



Pink Silk Moth

15. Here is my pick for the ugliest moth.



The Scottish Moth

So, in summary, we learned that most moths are drab spirits of the night, mysterious, and a few like the Black Witch Moth are even associated with death.

Back to the Black Witch Moth that has been hanging around our house for the holidays. The other night me and my dog Apache were out in the patio area when a big moth comes flapping his wings and flies by me 3 or 4 times. If you ever saw this moth flying, you would think it flies like a drunken sailor. It goes all over the place and never in a straight line. Apache tried to catch it but failed which was probably a good thing since legend has it that anybody who kills a Black Witch Moth is going to have bad luck and may even die.

Since I'm not quite ready to die yet and the chances of coming into a lot of money are near zero, I'm going with Hawaiian mythology where that Black Witch Moth is an embodiment of a dead family member's soul returning to say goodbye and/or to watch over me and my family.

HAPPY NEW YEAR!!

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