

Sphinx Moths

by Rebecca Miller-Cripps

Recently, local Master Gardeners received an email asking about the beautiful and noticeable moths seen hovering, like hummingbirds, over flowers this past summer. The writer was concerned that, not having seen these creatures before, they might be a new and invasive arrival.

It seems that our prolific rains and abundant moisture last year not only created lush plant growth and beautiful flowers, but also created a banner season for “bugs.” One of the benefactors of all this lushness was the native beneficial pollinator, the Sphinx Moth, aka hummingbird moth or hawk moth.

The U.S. Forest Service website (https://www.fs.usda.gov/wildflowers/pollinators/pollinator-of-the-month/hawk_moths.shtml) hosts a lovely article about hawk moths or sphinx moths. I quote from their comparison to a moth’s “respectable” cousin, the butterfly, that is out during the day capturing our attention and hearts. “Unfortunately, we usually vilify moths because of their association with the dark of night and our innate fear of darkness and things that go bump in the night.” Some sphinx moths do fly only at night, but this year the Mother Lode was abuzz with moths that appeared in the afternoon and at dusk to gather nectar.

Belonging to the insect family Sphingidae, which is part of the Order Lepidoptera (butterflies and moths), the caterpillars of these gorgeous native creatures are often referred to as “horn worms” for the long protuberance at their rear. They are cousins to our ubiquitous, and often despised, tomato hornworm whose parents are, indeed, sphinx moths. Some are so seldom seen—such as the Sonora Sphinx Moth that lives only in oak woodlands bordering the Sonoran Desert in Arizona and Northern Mexico—that only one sighting may be reported in any given year!

These are acrobatic, fast flyers that can hover, hum, and dart like hummingbirds. When I saw the first one this summer, I thought I was looking at an unrecognized hummingbird! Then I felt fortunate to see one individual hovering to feed on my *Salvia guaranitica* (black-and-blue sage). But, then, one of my sons, visiting for the weekend, pointed out many individual moths zipping through the canopy of the blooming desert willow.

According to “The Laws Guide to the Sierra Nevada,” several types of hawk moths can be found in the Sierra Nevada. Many of them feed on native California plants such as broadleaf trees (a reason to protect our California oaks), willows, rose and manzanita. My prolific grapevines may have provided caterpillar food for the Achemon Sphinx which lives in woodland and scrubby environments from Maine to California. The White-lined Sphinx took up residence in my yard in Jamestown this year, while the Ceanothus Silk Moth can be found from British Columbia to Baja. A beautiful, red-brown moth with large white “comma” marks on its wings, its caterpillars eat manzanita, buckbrush, willow, gooseberry, madrone and mountain mahogany.

Long tongues, sometimes two to three times the length of their body, assist these moths in finding nectar pools in tubular flowers. The story is told of Charles Darwin examining a rare

orchid from Madagascar that had a foot-long nectar spur. Much to the amusement of his colleagues, he hypothesized that an insect with an unusually long tongue must be able to drink the nectar. Two decades after Darwin's death, the Darwin's Hawk Moth was discovered. New species with even longer tongues are still being identified today.

If you're digging in your garden this winter and find a fat, dark-brown, short, cigar-shaped "thing," avoid the temptation to squash it. You are looking at the chrysalis/winter-hibernation stage of a sphinx moth. Some species pupate in the soil during the winter; others form cocoons attached to plant stalks.

The California Native Plant Society website, Calscape, ([https://calscape.org/lep/Hyles-lineata-\(White-lined-Sphinx\)?srchcr=sc5d398b79743ec](https://calscape.org/lep/Hyles-lineata-(White-lined-Sphinx)?srchcr=sc5d398b79743ec)) shows beautiful photos of the White-Lined Sphinx, with its native range extending the length of California. Entering an address into the search box will return a list of host plants for your location. Planting a "moonlight" garden of pale flowers that bloom at night (for the nocturnal cousins) may allow you to see one of these lovely creatures at work. Fragrant tubular flowers with ample amounts of nectar such as salvias and desert willow (for the diurnal moths) may also draw them in.

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