

Conservation Corner

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“Like a moth to a flame.”

Or, as was the case during one of our recent downpours, like a moth to the sidewalk outside our shop building. Though rescued from the rain, the moth soon died. Here at Conservation, with our IBSN walks, pollinator programs, and Monarch tag & release programs, it often seems that butterflies get all the attention. But with over 160,000 species of moths found worldwide, moths outnumber butterflies 15 to 1 in the insect order Lepidoptera. Moths are also older with fossil records dating 190 million years ago. Scientists believe the moths, many of them important pollinators, evolved alongside flowering plants.



Like most things in nature, moths come in all sizes, shapes, and colors. And while most species are dull-colored and fly at night, many are brightly colored and active during the day. Some of the showiest moths are sphinx or hawk moths. Perhaps you've enjoyed watching these striking moths hovering while feeding on nectar from flowers around dusk. It is their hummingbird behavior that gives them their common nickname – the hummingbird moths.

Hummingbird moths belong to the family Sphingidae. These medium to large-sized moths have a robust body and narrow front wings with wingspreads up to 6 inches, although 2 to 4.5 inches is more common in Iowa.

Like hummingbirds, these moths are strong fliers with very rapid wingbeats. Capable of hovering in mid air for extended periods of time, hummingbird moths sip nectar from deep-throated blossoms such as petunias and hosta blooms. Several sphinx species also serve as important pollinators of night-blooming plants.

The proboscis of hummingbird moths is several inches in length, often longer than its body, and varies greatly from the straight, straw-like beak of the hummingbird. The moth keeps the proboscis tightly coiled against the underside of its head. When feeding, internal fluid pressure allows the proboscis to uncoil and reach the nectar supply at the base of the flower. Think party noisemaker.

Our most widespread and abundant hummingbird moth is the white-lined sphinx, named for the broad white stripe on its front wing. The moth we found drowning on the sidewalk was a Carolina sphinx, a large gray moth with 6 pairs of prominent yellow-orange spots along its abdomen. Both may be found in any open habitat such as gardens, deserts, roadsides, and fields. Both are residents of the South that invade and colonize all of the states and southern Canada provinces every summer. The caterpillars of most sphinx species have a soft, spine-like process near the posterior end of their bodies and are known as hornworms. Some are pests of tomatoes, tobacco, and other plants. Fully grown caterpillars pupate and overwinter underground in burrows.

Best of all, unlike some moths, hummingbird moths are completely harmless. Their nectar feeding causes no damage to the flowers, and in Iowa even the hornworm caterpillar stage is of minor importance. So the next time these showy, nimble moths show up among your flowers, sit back and enjoy the show!