



Creature Feature: Spring 2013

By W. Scott Douglas

Mourning Cloak Butterfly



Mourning Cloak

One of the surest signs of spring for me is the first Mourning Cloak butterfly. Having it, or one of its bright orange relatives, the Comma or Question Mark, flutter by in the midst of the otherwise grey woods is a welcome sight. I often wondered though, how these butterflies could be out this early, given that there is no greenery anywhere for native caterpillars to eat. So, I did a little research. As it turns out, these brushfoot butterflies, of the family Nymphalidae, actually over-winter as adults. When the first warm days of spring come, they crawl out from their winter shelters in trees, inside fallen logs and under leaves to let the sun get their blood warm enough to fly. Since there are precious few flowers out at this point, these spring beauties lap up tree sap and salt from puddles or dung. They then find their mates, lay eggs and are gone by the time the warblers migrate through in May. Their caterpillars are barely out of the egg by then, successfully avoiding what would otherwise be significant predators.

Within 2 weeks after the adults lay their eggs, and then die, the caterpillars emerge, just in time for spring leaf emergence. The caterpillars of all three of our over-wintering butterflies feed on willow, elm and even nettles. They are all protected with clumps of spikes, which are not poisonous per se, but certainly are irritating if they become lodged in the skin. When the caterpillars are about 3 inches long, they find a quiet place to build their spiky brown chrysalis. It is well camouflaged, so you might not see it hanging under a twig or branch, or right off the trunk of a tree. The adults emerge in late August.



Mourning Cloak caterpillar

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Eastern Comma

When I was young, I spent hours chasing butterflies to try to capture them for my collection. This required a complicated

procedure involving a killing jar filled with poisonous fumes, pins, mounting boards and special cases for storage. With today's modern photography equipment, it's much easier to take a high quality digital photograph. I imagine the butterflies like it better that way too. If you try, make sure that you use the "macro" or close-up setting on your camera. If you would, share your successful butterfly hunting with us by posting photos on our Facebook page. We will help you identify your "catches" if we can.