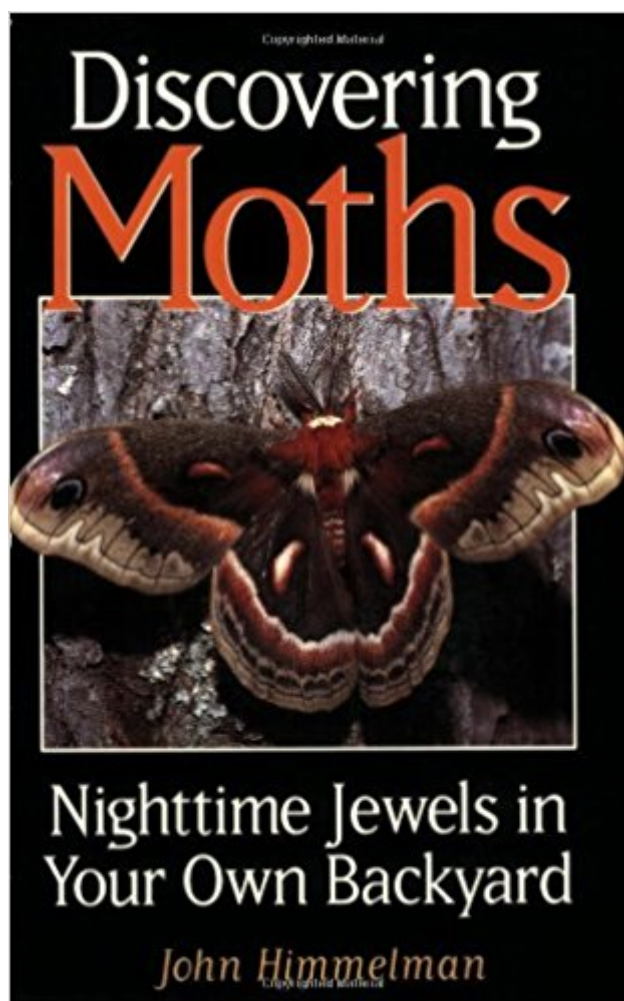


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# Discovering Moths: Nighttime Jewels In Your Own Backyard



## Synopsis

In lively, accessible prose, he explains the intricacy of moths' life cycle, their importance in nature, and how just a tiny handful of the many moth species are truly pests to humans. He tells how to attract moths with lights and bait, when and where to observe them, and how best to photograph these tiny subjects. Entertaining personal anecdotes and short profiles of some of the country's foremost mothers add human interest.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

Discovering Moths by John Himmelman is a wonderful, witty, and informative look at all things moth, a book packed with beautiful color photographs and black-and-white drawings by the author as well as a glossary and a bibliography, a well-researched book that is also easily accessible to non-experts like me. A very personable book, the author described his personal interests, discoveries, and fascination with these (mostly) nocturnal members of the order Lepidoptera, of which there are 110,000 species in the world, 11,000 in North America, and 2,300 in the author's home state of Connecticut. The first chapter described a group of adults and children he lead on August evening to look for moths, conveying quite well both his passion and his skill at presenting the world of moths to others. In this chapter, Himmelman described how he "sugared" for moths (baiting trees by painting on a mixture of stale beer, brown sugar, and various other aromatic and largely sweet ingredients) and provided instructions how others might attract moths the same way. Chapter two looked at the life cycle of moths. He examined caterpillars in depth, including anatomy, locomotion, and feeding techniques (some actually feed beneath the surface of the water, while

others, such as carpenterworms, bore into wood). He looked at caterpillar predators (major ones include ichneumon wasps and stinkbugs) and caterpillar defenses (some shoot acid). Pupation and cocoons were covered, as well as of course adult moth anatomy and physiology, including discussing how moths stay warm on cool nights (hair-like scales insulate their bodies and they shiver, vibrating their wings rapidly to warm the flight muscles) and how long they live (some live only a few days - and in fact are born without working mouthparts and so do not feed as adults - while others live for a few months, though the average life for an adult butterfly or moth is about two weeks). The third chapter looked at fifteen of the most commonly encountered moth families, providing overall life histories, descriptions, and profiles of representative species. Family Arctiidae for instance includes Tiger Moths (one species of which, the Isabella Moth, has as its larval form the famous Woolly Bear caterpillar) and Wasp Moths (day-flying moths that closely resemble wasps). Some members of this family also produce sounds that either help attract mates or warn bats of their unpalatability. Other notable families include the Owlet Moths and Cutworm Moths (Noctuidae, which is the largest of the Lepidoptera families and includes the blood-sucking Vampire Moth of India and Malaysia) and the Slug Caterpillar Moths (Limacodidae, whose caterpillars lack legs but have rather a sucker-like foot on their underside). Chapter four looked at what most people think of when they think of moths (well, one of the first things anyway); why moths are attracted to light. Surprisingly, there is not complete agreement on the subject. Most theories see moths not as attracted to light but rather trapped by it. Some theories imagine moths as seeing a dark halo around a light source and that moths attempting to escape the light head towards these dark areas, though instead of escaping the light they are either drawn nearer to it or left hopelessly spiraling around it. Other researchers speculate that moths rest around porch lights because to them it is as bright as day (and thus time to rest). In this chapter Himmelman also discussed how bug zappers with disabled electrifying grids are an excellent way to attract moths but that otherwise the devices are evil, as they kill very few mosquitoes but kill thousands of harmless or beneficial insects, including not only moths but midges and various mosquito predators. Himmelman also covered how to attract moths with glowing sheets hanging in one's backyard (as well as some of the pitfalls of this technique; predators soon learn the location of these sheets, requiring the moth-watcher to either move the sheets or take a few nights off once in a while lest local birds, wasps, and frogs make a meal of all those moths). Chapter five examined a typical year of moth activity in the author's backyard, describing moths for each month of the year. I was surprised to learn that some moths, such as a group called the Sallows, is active in the cold month of March (they feed on the flowing sap of maples, beeches, and birches, getting at the sap thanks to broken branches, woodpeckers,

and maple sugar farmers). Chapter six looked at the interaction of moths and men. A wide-ranging and too brief chapter, the author looked at among other things Mothra (nemesis of Godzilla), moth pests (notably the Gypsy Moth), the Death's Head Sphinx (the moth of *Silence of the Lambs*), moths and commercial silk production, moths as food, and even Mexican jumping beans (the larvae of a moth whose larval and pupal stages occur within the seed capsules of the Mexican bean shrub). Chapter seven looked at famous pioneers in the study of moths (and some of their bitter rivalries) and chapter eight looked at notable researchers in the field today. Chapter nine showed how to find and raise moths from egg, larval, or pupae stages and discussed some of the equipment one might construct towards that end, including beating sheets (to help get caterpillars from branches), a "caterpillary" (a way to help keep a branch fresh in a terrarium for hungry caterpillars without drowning them), caterpillar sleeves (a way to rear caterpillars outdoors), and a "cocoonery" (an outdoor structure that gives newly emerging moths plenty of room to stretch their wings once they leave their pupal stage). He also had several pages of tips devoted to moth photography. Chapter ten was a fascinating look at day-flying moths and chapter eleven examined the pros and cons of collecting moths versus only observing or photographing them, debates over why some insects seem to be more worth saving than others, the ethics of butterfly releases at weddings and funerals (he is against the practice), and issues of moth habitat preservation.

Moths generally get bad press. We think of clothes moths, tomato hornworm moths, cutworms, armyworms, bollworms, codling moths and the like before we think of io moths, luna moths, underwings or tiger moths. Butterflies, their daytime cousins (although as Himmelman points out there are a fair number of day-flying moths) are much more loved and studied. John Himmelman, in writing "Discovering Moths: Nighttime Jewels in Your Own Backyard," has done much to redress this imbalance. His drawings and excellent photographs make this book a work of aesthetic beauty as well as a fascinating read. Himmelman also discusses an interesting trend- the study of living insects, such as butterflies and dragonflies, has started to become at least as popular as collecting the same insects (in butterflies more so!). He sees a similar trend (but much slower) for moths. The last chapter of his book is in fact one of the better discussions of the ethics of taking of insect life for science or pleasure that I've ever read. While he does not like collecting himself, he understands the impulse, as well as the scientific interest. Unlike many butterflies (except skippers and some lycaenids - I know this from much experience as I am a participant and also an editor for the 4th of July Butterfly Count of the North American Butterfly Association), it is often difficult to identify moths (although it can be done to a degree). This is partly because of the sheer number of species

involved (11,000 species of moths in North America as opposed to about 700 or so butterflies), partly because of the similarity of many closely related moth species and partly because not all moths are yet known. Thus judicious collecting has its place. Still I have always thought in my more reflective moods that collecting should be only a prelude to study of the living insect. Like Himmelman I cannot condemn collecting (I am currently curating a collection of over 100,000 specimens at a state university and I was at one time an avid tiger beetle collector) but I do think that observation has a place and that place should be more exulted than it often is, without putting down the continuing contribution of the collector and taxonomist. This is a great book for the entomologist and especially for those who like to explore new areas within the subject. There are unfortunately few books on moths. We are still awaiting a guide to western moths to match the Peterson Field Guide to the eastern species, and the Moth Book, by Holland, is way out of date-although still charming. Himmelman has gone a long ways down this road and I only hope more books like this will appear in the near future!

Easy and enjoyable book about looking for, baiting for, and enjoying moths! Loved the chronology of when the author saw certain moths starting to show up on his blacklighting sheets. Was very helpful to know how, when, where, and what to use to find moths in my backyard.

This is one of the most enjoyable nature books I've read in years. I'll be paying more attention to these ,mostly, denizens of the night now. The fact that it is written by an amateur shows, the enthusiasm for his subject shines through! Mr Himmelman's other adult nature book (he has illustrated numerous nature oriented books as well as other subjects for children), "Night Singing Insects" is superb as well. All I can say is more books please!

Bought as gift. Friend loved it

Yes, finally! A quality book on the true beauty of moths! I always liked moths (particularly the beautiful silkmths), so I really wanted to have this book. It provides good information on moths as well as how to photograph them (which was one of my primary reasons for getting this book). The only issue I have, though, is that I wish it had more pictures of some underappreciated beauties.

This is an excellent resource for anyone wanting to learn more about these amazing insects. I work for our state conservation dept. and get a lot of calls about moths. I have several books on moths

and butterflies and this is one of the top two.

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