

## Colorado Insect of Interest

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# Polyphemus Moth

**Scientific Name:** *Antheraea polyphemus*  
(Cramer)

**Order:** Lepidoptera (Butterflies, Moths, Skippers)

**Family:** Saturniidae (Giant Silk Moths)

**Identification and Descriptive Features:** The polyphemus moth is one of the largest moths in the state with a wingspan of 3 15/16 - 5 7/8 inches (10 - 15 cm). The upper wings range from reddish to yellowish brown and the margin of the forewing margin is usually lighter than the basal area. The underside of the wings has rust, brown, and pink markings. The hindwings are marked with clear oval eyespots are ringed with yellow, blue, and black. These eyespot markings are related to the common name for this moth, which is taken from the cyclops Polyphemus of Greek mythology.

The fully developed larvae are large (3-inches/7.5 cm) and apple green with raised, white, diagonal lines on the sides of the body and orange-golden tufted tubercles on each segment.

**Distribution in Colorado:** The polyphemus moth is widely distributed in the wooded areas of the foothills and in many of the State's urban forests.

**Life History and Habits:** Winter is spent in the pupal stage, within a tough silken cocoon. Adults emerge in the late spring and early summer. Emergence occurs in the late afternoon, and mating occurs the same day, from late evening to early morning. The adults live only a brief period, less than a week, and do not feed.

Females lay biscuit-shaped brown eggs on the leaves of host plants. Eggs may be laid singly or in small groups. Caterpillars emerge about 10-14 days after eggs are laid. The caterpillars feed on the leaves of their host plant and are solitary feeders, not present in groups. Feeding can extend through summer and they may utilize a variety of deciduous hosts including viburnum, oaks, weeping birch, plum, chokecherry, dogwood, maples, and hawthorn. Older caterpillars eat



**Figure 1.** Adult polyphemus moth. Photograph by David Leatherman.



**Figure 2.** Late stage caterpillar of the polyphemus moth.

an entire leaf and then cut the leaf petiole at the base so it falls to the ground, perhaps a defensive measure to eliminate signs of feeding.

They become full grown in late summer and spin silken cocoons. The cocoons are usually constructed within leaves attached to the tree pupation but may also be found amongst leaves and other debris on the ground. One generation is produced annually in Colorado.

Polyphemus moths appear to be less common than they have been in the past, reflecting a decline in the populations of many North American giant silk moths. Among the speculative causes for this decline are increased parasitization by introduced species of tachinid flies and adult mortality at lights.



**Figure 3.** Cocoon of the polyphemus moth.



**Figure 4.** Pupa of the polyphemus moth exposed from the cocoon.