



California Wildlife Center

Patient of the Week

May 5, 2023



Patient shortly after intake

Polyphemus Moth

Here at California Wildlife Center, we work with over 170 different species of animals. In general, about 75% of our patients are various types of birds and almost 25% of our patients are mammals. We also care for a small number of reptiles and amphibians every year. Although it is uncommon, occasionally we will receive a call about an injured spider or insect in need of help.

Recently a Polyphemus Moth was brought to our doors. Polyphemus Moths are a species of giant silk moth that is native to North America. They are tan in color with a large eye-shaped spot on each rear wing and have a wingspan of almost six inches across. The moths can be found in a variety of habitats including forests, woodlands, orchards, and suburban areas.



Damage to moth's right wing

Once at CWC, the adult female insect was assessed by our hospital staff. It was determined that she was suffering from damage to the trailing edge of her right hind wing and was missing part of her right antenna. The moth was in good body condition and was alert when handled. She was placed in a soft-sided enclosure for observation during the day.

Moths start their lives as eggs. Adult female moths lay single or small groups of eggs on the leaves of host plants, such as maple, oak, and birch trees. The eggs are small, round, and pale in color. After about 10 days the eggs will hatch into small green caterpillars, also known as "silkworms." As soon as the caterpillars hatch, they begin to feed on their host plant. They grow rapidly and over the course of five to six weeks the caterpillars will become three inches long and $\frac{3}{4}$ inches in diameter.

Once the caterpillars are fully grown, they will spin a cocoon around themselves. The cocoons are made of silk and are usually brown in color. Inside the cocoons the caterpillars transform into a pupa, which is a non-feeding, inactive stage of development. After two to three weeks the insects are ready to emerge as an adult moth.

Polyphemus Moths will live one to two weeks as an adult. During this time their only mission is to mate and lay eggs. These insects have no working mouth parts and they do not eat or drink during this stage of life. Male moths will spend their time mating with females, and the females of the species will mate and then lay their eggs before passing away. Females can lay over 100 eggs, but usually only deposit a few on any single plant.



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The Polyphemus Moth patient was observed throughout the day, and she started to become more alert and active as the sun set. At this point it was noted that the patient had laid six eggs in her enclosure. Hospital staff moved the eggs to a safe location and placed the moth in a dark room to assess her ability to fly. Luckily, the damage to her right wing and antenna did not cause any deficits and she was able to easily fly and navigate the enclosed area. Once it was dark outside the patient was released, where she flew 20 feet into the air before nestling into a nearby tree, presumably to continue laying her eggs.

The six moth eggs are currently being cared for by a homecare volunteer who has experience raising moths and butterflies. We are hopeful that in a few months we will be able to release our patient's offspring into the wild.

If you find an injured Polyphemus Moth, contact your local wildlife rehabilitation center for advice. Most moth species are nocturnal, and it is easy to mistake a sleeping moth for one who needs care. You can do even more to help wild animals in need by donating at cawildlife.org!