



What's so funny about moths?

By Ken Rosenthal

There are many theories about humor, about why it exists, how it developed, and why we find something funny. The current dominant philosophical theory of humor is the Incongruity Theory. In this theory, humor arises from the perception of something that goes against our expectations or observed patterns. I love using humor in my programs, and connecting visitors to nature using absurd and fantastical comparisons is one of my favorite tools.

When I lead programs for children, I often ask questions of my participants to get an idea of what they already know and to keep them involved through participation. If I am not getting as much participation as I would like, I may ask a question and offer funny answers to induce conversation. For example, asking the group what a deer might eat, and then offering them answers like pizza, hamburgers and ice cream. Another example is taking the extraordinary abilities of an organism and placing it in a human context. (Haven't we all considered, at one time or another, how different - and awkward - it would be if humans used scent instead of vision to recognize each other as dogs do?)

Which brings us to moths. How would a human life look through a moth's compound eyes? Or, how would living our life like a moth change into something amusing, or bizarre, or even cringe-worthy? I prefer admiration to imitation - I'm glad I am not 100 times my birth weight and that as a child I didn't defecate with the regularity of a caterpillar. But the Cinereous Mourner might feel differently. Their

nestlings mimic megalopygid caterpillars in behavior and shape, so that when their parents are not around the young birds resemble stinging caterpillars instead of a defenseless snack.

Let's circle back around to scent. Most female moths produce pheromones, scents that can trigger attraction in males. A team of researchers studied the pheromones of the Silkworm (*Bombyx mori*). After 20 years they had collected a miniscule 6.4 mg of the substance, yet they had needed a half million female abdomens to accumulate that! Despite females releasing such tiny amounts, males can use their antennae to find females more than 10 kilometers away. They weave back and forth in flight, course-correcting each time they find a trace of pheromones. That is an impressive sense of smell. Imagine trying to find a lunch spot the same way, while driving with your window down. Consider that sensitivity to smell the next time you take out the trash. Or when you go to a garbage dump, public restroom, or candle store.

Then there's feeding. Caterpillars have one job: eating. I find this a laudable goal. Many moths are host-specific in their feeding habits as caterpillars, eating only one type of plant. This specificity in food preference even occurs for other lesser-known delicacies consumed by caterpillars, including other caterpillars, snails, flies, antelope horns, tortoise shells, sloth scat, and the tears of sleeping animals. Imagine paging through that menu. More personally, had I known about host-specificity at a younger age, I might have tried convincing my father I was host-specific to Lucky Charms.

I like to use humor in my programs because I know that humor is something I enjoy and remember from how I spend my free time. An absurd juxtaposition coupling an interesting fact with a good chuckle can create a lasting memory and positive association with the topic you are presenting. That single moment can make a lasting memory that provokes deeper thought, inspires further sharing, and even promote action that leads to preservation of the resource. After all, everyone loves a good laugh.

Ken Rosenthal is the nature center manager at Walker Nature Center in Reston, VA. He presented Bringing the Funny and Moths and Mothing 101 at this spring's Chesapeake Regional Workshop in Wallops Island. He tried to combine the two subjects into one article, and that is how you ended up with what you just read. He can be reached via email at krosenthal@reston.org.