
SUNNYSIDE THYMES

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“Helping Others Grow”

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Guess Who's Coming to Dinner?

SMG Education Committee

Whoa, what is that? This creepy crawly, scary looking green monster, almost as big as a hot dog, is a HICKORY HORNED DEVIL caterpillar. In addition to being enormous, they have orange horn-like structures on their heads that make them look fierce – but they're harmless! They're so big and fierce-looking that even chickens – which usually love to eat caterpillars – have been known to stay away from them. They live in deciduous forest areas, including Indiana. If you have hickory-type trees in your back yard – such as walnuts, pecans, button bush, filbert, and ash, then you might have an HHD coming to dinner in late July to the middle of August.

HHDs (larvae) hatch from eggs laid by the regal moth (*Citheronia regalis* [Fabricius]), and they live for about 5 weeks. They eat leaves constantly and during the last week as a caterpillar, they gorge themselves on leaves storing up energy for their pupation and final transformation. Then, they look for soft earth to burrow into for pupation, where they live in dark brown cocoons. Pupation could last one season or even two, depending on when the pupa senses conditions are ripe for its emergence.



When the regal moth (also known as the walnut moth) emerges, they do not have mouths that can absorb nutrients. This is the reason HHDs gorge themselves their final week. It is the biggest moth found north of Mexico. It has gray-green and orange wings that are four to six inches wide. So, if a regal lands on your nose and spreads its wings, it would look like you are wearing a beautiful mask, or a cool pair of shades!

The regal, like most other moths, is nocturnal and lives only about a week. They must work fast! They mate during the second evening after emergence and begin oviposition at dusk of the third evening. Their work done, they die from exhaustion.

The HHD does have natural enemies: Parasitoids. Several species of tachinid flies, one species of sarcophagid fly and one species of braconid wasp, have been reported. The regal moth is a beautiful and fascinating member of our native fauna, and its larvae should not be killed. You may have already known all of this. I didn't, so I'm glad to have learned about this lovely creature
