

An Alpine History Mystery – Solved!

Searching for your Valentine Mystery Solved!

February 2014

Were you able to solve our History Mystery: “What creature living in Alpine’s chaparral, emerges every spring to search for its special Valentine and will travel up to 20 miles in less than four days to find her?” The answer is the Ceanothus Silk Moth, *Hyalophora euryalus*, and what a fascinating creature this is.



About mid-February these beautiful moths begin to emerge from their cocoons. Their wings are a striking rusty-red with grey-brown outer edges and a black edged white stripe crossing each wing. All four wings have a white comma-shaped mark near the center, and the forewings have an oval shaped eyespot near the tips. This is a large moth with a wingspan approximately 4 to 5 inches across.

Although the Ceanothus Silk Moth is very common from Baja California to British Columbia, sightings are rare because they live only a few days and they are most active from 3 am to dawn. Adult moths do not eat because their genetically atrophied mouth parts are too weak for the task. The females normally hide from predators and conserve their energy while glands that extend from their abdomen release powerful pheromones to attract males. The males are guided to their lovely lady by their large feathery antennas that are capable of sensing a single molecule of the powerful female scent. When mating is completed, the female retracts its glands, the signals stop, and she soon begins to lay her eggs.

The mating ritual and laying of eggs is all completed within the short, 3 to 4 day lifespan of the moth. But then, the cycle of life begins again. The eggs hatch in about two weeks and hungry larvae emerge to begin



feeding on host plants such as ceanothus, manzanita, and mountain mahogany. The caterpillars grow to be plump and about 3 inches long with yellow spines along their back. When full-grown, the caterpillars will spin as much as a mile of silk, building a cocoon attached to the host plant, where they will reside until next year when they emerge as a beautiful new Ceanothus Silk Moth.

You can find a very cool video of the life cycle of the Ceanothus Silk Moth on the internet at: <http://lepidoptera.jcmdi.com/m/Sat/euryalus/euryalusv.html>

We hope that you enjoyed this Alpine *Natural* History Mystery and that you found your Valentine this year without too much difficulty. If you would like to become a member of the Alpine Historical Society to receive our newsletter and to help support our mission and programs please send a note to: membership@alpinehistory.org or call 619-445-2544 and we'll send membership information to you right away.