



## GoGetSetOnYourQuestionMarks

by Jeffrey Glassberg

Always use proper punctuation  
when discussing commas @#!

If you're like me, grammar may not have been your best subject at school. Perhaps that's why puzzling through the intricacies of Question Marks and comma identification can be so difficult!

The commas, placed in the genus *Polygonia*, are closely related to the tortoiseshells (genus *Nymphalis*). Both of these groups are found throughout the Northern Hemisphere, in both the New and Old Worlds.

As with the tortoiseshells, of which there are five species in North America — four named tortoiseshell and one named Mourning Cloak — the commas also have one odd man out — the Question Mark. There are seven species of commas and Question Marks resident in the United States and Canada. An additional two species are endemic to Mexico. Six species occur only in Europe and Asia.

Most species have a single brood each year, with adults overwintering. However Question Marks, Eastern Commas, and Gray Commas have two broods over much, if not all, of their ranges.

Many individuals can flummox even experienced butterflyers because some of these species are quite variable and there is disagreement about the best placement of certain populations. Here, I'll try to provide some help in recognizing the different species, best accomplished by seeing both the upper and underside of the same individual, but you may still encounter individuals that are best noted as "unidentified." Let's start with an easy one!

### Question Mark

Question Marks are named for the silvery-white marking in the middle of their HW underside. Unlike on the commas, these silvery-white markings on Question Marks almost always resemble a "question mark" — having a dot adjacent to a longer curved mark

(see photo 1, pg. 18). Nine hundred ninety-nine times out of a thousand, this will work to identify question marks.

However, very rarely 1. a Question Mark will have the dot fused to the longer curved mark creating — you guessed it — a comma (see photo 3, pg. 20); or 2. a Question Mark will have a tripartite mark, with the longer curved mark broken in two (see photo 5, pg. 20); or 3. a comma will have its comma broken in two so that it resembles a question mark (I have seen an individual comma that fits this description, but unfortunately do not have a photo).

So, are there other ways to distinguish Question Marks from commas when just viewing their undersides? Well, the great majority of Question Marks are significantly larger than are commas. This fact, together with the more powerful flight of Question Marks, allows experienced butterflyers to identify most Question Marks in flight.

The second feature you can look at is the lower end of the FW median band. Note that on Question Marks the outer edge of this band is straight and sharp. On commas, the outer edge of this band is either stepped or curved and is usually not so sharp.

Question Marks are usually easy to distinguish from commas on their topsides. The most reliable mark is the horizontal black spot just outside of the wide black cell-end bar on the FW (see photo 7). None of the commas have a black spot here. Another feature is that the wing margins, especially on the HWs, are often bright violet (see photo 8).

In addition to the usual variability, Question Marks and some species of commas have different color forms. Which form a particular individual will sport is determined by a combination of its genetics and environmental factors, especially temperature. In the summer, most Question Marks look rather like the individual in photo 10 while