



Precious Metal Conserving Swamp Metalmarks in Wisconsin

by Susan Sullivan Borkin

All that glitters is not gold, but some things are just as precious... take, for example, the metalmarks, a large family of small butterflies found mainly in the tropics of Central and South America. Many, though not all, of the estimated 1400-1500 species have reflective scales that give a metallic sheen to portions of their wings, and that no doubt inspired their English name. Most of the 22 metalmark species found in the United States can be found only near the Mexican border. Of the few species that live far to the north, only Swamp Metalmark occurs in Wisconsin.

Above, Swamp Metalmarks' wings are deep bronze with dark crescents near the base. Towards the outer edges, there are two bands of reflective silver markings resembling strands of tinsel interwoven between the veins.

Beneath, the wings are bright golden amber. Dark basal markings and discrete patches of iridescent silver scales lie in two concentric bands as above. Male and female coloration is similar but males have more pointed forewings and reduced forelegs. Swamp Metalmarks are very similar in appearance to both Northern Metalmarks and Little Metalmarks. The three are so similar that it has been proposed that these species diverged relatively recently from a common ancestor. This hypothesis is further supported by the facts that there is little overlap in their ranges and that they share physical traits not found in other members of the genus.

While Little Metalmark and Northern Metalmark were described in 1831 and 1866 respectively, Swamp Metalmark was not recognized as a distinct species until 1937. So,



Opposite page: Swamp Metalmarks often pitch under leaves when disturbed. August 1996, Riveredge Nature Center, Ozaukee Co, WI.

This page top: Fully grown caterpillars are quite hairy. June 1995, WI (in laboratory). Middle: A Swamp Metalmark caterpillar imitating a Shih-Tzu. 1992, WI (in laboratory). Bottom: A pupa. June 1995, WI (in laboratory).



even though there are published records documenting Wisconsin occurrences dating back to 1883 and 1900, at that time the butterflies were identified as Northern Metalmarks or as a western species, Fatal Metalmark. Swamp Metalmarks were relatively rare even then. The habitats they live in — calcareous fens and similar wetlands — were never common, and like other metalmarks their dispersal is low. Swamp Metalmark was among the first insects identified as needing protection when added to Wisconsin's Endangered and Threatened Species List in 1989 and its status was revised from threatened to endangered by 1997.