



Book Reviews

Peterson Field Guide to Moths of Northeastern North America

David Beadle and Seabrooke Leckie. 2012. Houghton Mifflin Harcourt. Softcover 611 pp. \$29.

Review by Wade Wander

On our NABA North Jersey chapter field trips a commonly heard cry when pursuing a butterfly that turns out to be a moth is “Oh, it’s just a moth,” delivered with heart-rending disappointment normally reserved for such pitiable occasions as discovering that your dog has eaten your winning lottery ticket. So why is it that amateur interest in moths has lagged so far behind that of butterflies? Is it because moths, most of which are nocturnal, are too much of a challenge to our rod-deficient vision? Or that their enormous diversity (some 11,000 species and counting in North America) is too intimidating? Or maybe, just maybe, the lack of a user-friendly field guide is the culprit?

Well, no more excuses. This latest addition to the iconic series of Peterson field guides may go a long way to jump-start interest in moths among naturalists. Authors Beadle and Leckie have done what has been needed for some time: replaced the old Peterson field guide to eastern moths by 44 *American Butterflies*, Spring 2012



the venerable Charles V. Covell, Jr., and its photographs (many in black-and-white) of pinned specimens, with a guide featuring (Hallelujah!) high-quality color photographs of living specimens. The Covell guide included 1300 species in a larger geographic area (all of North America east of the 100th meridian), whereas the Beadle-Leckie version includes 1500 species in a smaller area (northeastern North America). (Full disclosure: the reviewer submitted many photographs, 6 of which appear in the guide, and received a free copy from the publisher.) This is a tremendous improvement and has helped me shrink my large, and — until now — growing, collection of unidentified photographed moths.

The guide contains brief introductory discussions on a variety of topics such as how to attract, identify, and photograph moths; flight periods; ranges; habitats; host plants; abundance; taxonomy; and conservation that the beginner will find useful and interesting. The back of the book contains a glossary,

index of moths including English and scientific names, and a handy checklist of the all of the species in the guide, with both scientific and common names and Hodges numbers (a number assigned to every known species of moth by Ronald Hodges). Note that many of the English names in this guide differ from the English names in Covell. The beginner would be wise to consult a list of printed and internet resources prepared by the authors.

But the make-or-break aspect of this guide — like all field guides — is the size and quality of the depictions of moth species, and how spatial and temporal distribution are presented. The guide is organized in the now-standard arrangement of text/range maps and photographs on facing pages. The text is brief for most species and range maps are included for most of the macromoths but omitted for all of the micros (instead relying on very broad written descriptions). The range maps, which are sufficiently large, were created using an extrapolation method based on records within ecoregions. For example, if the authors found a record for a species in a particular ecoregion the distribution was then extended to cover the entire ecoregion. An imperfect method but perhaps justified given the paucity of records. A small temporal bar graph is concise but takes a little getting used to, with the bar divided into 3 different-colored sections, each representing 3 months (March-May, June-August, and September-November). A narrow black line underneath the bar indicates the approximate flight time. Caterpillar host plants are listed for most species. Species are grouped by family, subfamily, and tribe. Brief discussions heading each group include whether or not they are attracted to lights. The use of different-color backgrounds to help separate various groupings is helpful, and provides welcome visual relief from having to stare at hundreds of pages of moths on white backgrounds

A guide to a relatively poorly understood group of organisms such as moths is likely to contain some errors. I noted a few mistakes in the range maps and/or range descriptions and others, more expert than I, may question a few

of the species identifications. Other errors can be explained by a lack of careful editing, such as the heading of glyphs extending onto pages of bird-dropping moths and yellowhorns. The hind wings of many species are not shown — a disappointment particularly for the underwing moths in the genus *Catocala*, where the color and pattern of the hindwings is critical for identification. Also, was it necessary to show so many of the micromoths at up to 8x life size? I would have preferred to see many of the micros shown at perhaps 3 or 4x life size with temporal bar graphs and omitting the written descriptions, which would have allowed several more species per page. For many species, arrows pointing to presumed important field marks are not discussed in the text, leaving the reader to divine the authors’ intentions. The end pages showing silhouettes of sub-groups from above or the side could have been made more useful if the page numbers of the groups were included.

But my major complaint is that though the layout is attractive, it is also inefficient. I counted more than 50 pages of text with enough empty space to accommodate at least one more species. Although this new guide is slightly taller and noticeably thicker than the Covell guide, more pages could possibly have been added, thus increasing the number of species covered. Unlike field guides to other taxa that are often toted in the field, most users of this guide will likely be sitting in field chairs or relaxing in the luxury of a deck chair, a living-room couch, or in front of a computer screen comparing their photos to those in the book, so a little extra heft would not be a liability.

I have used my copy daily for about a month and 2 pages in the index are falling out. An unwelcome indication of a widespread problem or just a bad copy?

These above deficiencies and minor errors notwithstanding, this guide — in particular thanks to its full-color coverage of 1500 species — could easily turn a casual interest in moths into an obsession and I highly recommend it. 