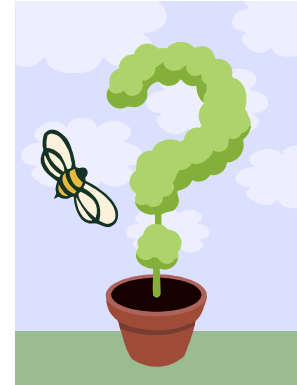


“Do I Know You?”

In the Brazilian jungles butterflies abound. Myriads of them seek minerals from muddy pools and siphon up the rich liquid with their straw-like mouthparts. It looks like one species dominates and hundreds will feed at one time. On closer inspection, however, one can tell that, in reality, there are many different species that all have very similar markings and color. Some are very tasty to birds, others are toxic or really taste bad. This is a case of protective mimicry. Since the similarity is so great, predators tend to avoid all of these butterflies, edible as well as non edible.



Other insects use color and pattern deception as well. The Syrphid flies (edible) resemble wasps or bees so well that they are avoided by most predators. The ruse is completed, not only by their coloration and pattern, but by their habits as well. They visit flowers, let their hind legs hang when they fly (like bees with laden pollen sacs) and they hover like bees or wasps. Even the larvae are protected by being green in appearance and can go undetected on a plant as they feed on aphids.

Not all insects look like other insects. Some resemble their environment so well that they go undetected by their enemies. Many moths have spots and markings that make them appear to be a bit of bark from a tree. Of course, these moths frequently alight on tree trunks that have the same colors and patterns as the moth. Under wing moths, found in our forests, have bark-like patterns on their forewings, but have brightly colored hind wings in red, pink or orange, banded with black. If they are discovered by a bird while they are resting on a tree, they will quickly take to wing and flash the bright coloration to alarm their would be consumer. The bright colors also serve as a warning coloration to the enemy, even though these moths are completely edible.

Some insects have markings that resemble large eyes on their bodies, especially on the wings. Our local polyphemus moth has very large eyespots on the top side of the hind wings. Normally, at rest, this moth holds its wings over its head, which exposes the underside of the wing. The coloration of this underside looks like a dried up leaf, with grey and brown color patterns. Upon being disturbed, however, the moth opens its wings and shows the eyespots on the hind wing. To enhance the allusion of being a large, tan creature with enormous eyes, The moth “pumps” its wings, alternately covering and then exposing the “eyes” to appear it is blinking. It must really work well, as this large moth is the most common and wide-spread Saturniid species in the U.S.

We probably walk by many, many insects in a day, not knowing they are there because of the camouflage or thinking that they are some creature they are not. Survival in the insect world is a tough proposition. Anything to give them an advantage is to their benefit!

