



Flash Dance



Camouflage coloring in insects combined with bright colors that can be “flashed” when they feel endangered is a great escape ploy. Many groups of insects exhibit this characteristic, but it is especially prominent among the butterflies, grasshoppers, stick insects, true bugs and members of the order *Homoptera*. Most insects that show this phenomenon have dull or camo colored forewings and brightly colored hindwings. The forewings normally cover the hindwings until the deception and color is needed. The so-called “underwing” moths have mottled, drab forewings that resemble the bark of the trees on which they rest during the day. If they are discovered and disturbed by a predator, they immediately take wing, flying fast and displaying the red, orange, yellow, blue or white of their hind wings. Since this flight is begun with a burst of speed, the bird or other predator is confused and startled, just long enough for the moth to escape and find another tree trunk on which to rest and conceal itself anew.

Slower moving insects, like the “giant silk moths” do not have the escape speed of the underwing moths and therefore must rely on another method of keeping a predator at bay. Many of these moths have large eyespots on their hind wings that are partially covered when the moth is at rest. If disturbed, the moths will “pump” their wings up and down, causing the eyespots to appear to be blinking. Since these moths have a wingspan of six or more inches, the sight is very impressive and could represent an owl or other animal that could attack the attacker of the moth, thus giving it a chance of survival.

The tropical owl butterfly (wingspan about 4-5 inches) has similar eyespots on its hind wings, but this time on the underside. With its wings closed over its head, it has a camouflaged appearance, much like a dead leaf. It normally will rest on a small twig in its jungle forest home. If it is discovered, it will open its wings while resting in an upside down position. This displays the eyespots as if it were an owl sitting on the branch. Some insects have special body designs to assist in their flash dance.

A tropical Homopteran, similar to our cicada, has a curiously shaped peanutlike head that is marked in cryptic colors and patterns that resemble a snake or lizard head. This alone would indicate that the creature is not what it really is, but rather a reptile bent on attacking whatever would want to make a Homopteran a meal. To add to this effect, however, the insect has eyespots on its hind wings that it can flash when disturbed.

The world of insects demonstrates a tremendous variety of methods to survive. Camouflage, scare tactics, chameleonism, and flash dances all seem to have their part in the success of the class “Insecta”. After all, the insects outnumber us about a million to one. Dance anyone?

