

WILDLIFE OF VICTORIA PARK

by John Serrao

LUNA MOTH

It has been called our country's "most stunningly beautiful insect", yet few of us are lucky enough to see the Luna Moth. This huge, lime-green moth with its pair of long, gracefully curved "tails" trailing the hind wings, purplish-pink wing edges, and prominent moon-like eyespots on each wing, only flies at night. But it is attracted to lights, and some people are amazed to see one fluttering around outdoor porch lights or all-night gas stations. On a recent stay at a state park cabin, several Luna Moths came to a black light that I brought along to attract nocturnal insects.

The Luna Moth occurs from southern Canada to central Florida. It belongs to the “giant silk moth” family, and like many of its equally large or even larger relatives — Cecropia, Polyphemus, Promethea, Imperial, Royal Walnut moths — it has no functional mouthparts and doesn’t feed during its one-week life span. All feeding is done during the 5 to 6 week caterpillar stage, on the leaves of sweet gum, persimmon, and hickory. Afterwards, the bright green, thumb-sized caterpillar spins a silken cocoon on the ground beneath leaf litter. Out of this cocoon emerges the gorgeous adult with a 4 1/2-inch wingspan. In Florida there are 3 generations per year, compared to a single one in the northern parts of its range where the entire winter is spent in the cocoon stage.

The moth’s long “tails” are thought to function as acoustic deflectors against bats, causing the sonar of these nocturnal predators to mistakenly attack these trailing appendages instead of the

moth's vulnerable body. The main danger facing Luna Moths today is the use of increasingly potent pesticides around our lawns, gardens and parks. Wouldn't it be a shame to lose this incomparably beautiful, delicate, harmless creature because of our quest for the perfect lawn?