



Mourning Cloak Butterfly is a Sure Sign of Spring

By Pamm Cooper, UConn Home & Garden Education Center

One of the first butterflies seen in early spring in Connecticut is the Mourning Cloak butterfly (*Nymphalis antiopa*). It is one of the most widespread butterfly species, and it is also one of the longest living as an adult. Any seen flying about in early spring spent the winter in a sheltered spot somewhere close by. On warm winter days with no snow cover I have seen one or two flying about in sunny, open woods.

This is a large butterfly with a wingspan between 2 ½ and 4 inches. The upper wings are a deep chocolate brown with a wide creamy yellow border along the outside margin. Just outside this border is a row of iridescent blue or purple spots. The color of these spots can vary as the sun strikes them at different angles.

Males are very territorial, and they defend their area by chasing away, or at least attempting to do so, any perceived threat. I have actually had one land on my head, unaware of that fact until I heard a whirring sound and felt something lightly fluttering on my head. It was the male mourning cloak I had just seen flying up from the hiking trail just in front of me. It had doubled back and “jumped” me from behind. I could make out the shadow of my head with the butterfly’s shadow on it.



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Eggs are laid in small masses on leaves on in rings around the twigs of a host plant, especially willow and elm. Eggs are laid just as leaves begin to appear in the spring. Caterpillars feed together until they are ready to pupate. Mourning cloaks have two generations a year. The caterpillars are charcoal gray with red feet and dark spines.

Mourning cloaks do not visit flowers very often, instead preferring sap flows on trees, dung, or rotting fruits that have fallen to the ground. They might be seen on tree stumps of recently cut trees if sap is still flowing out.

Mourning cloaks are found most often along woodland edges and watercourses, but can appear along power lines also, especially where there are wetland areas with native willows.

If you are hiking along a woodland trail, you may see a mourning cloak take off just in front of you. If so, watch where it goes. It will often be a male who was perched or patrolling his territory. They often will return almost exactly to the same spot. Even it seems to be flying quite a distance away, maybe deep into the woods, wait where you are, and you may be rewarded with a close-up view as it returns to guard its territory.

One final word on this butterfly: they often make a loud click before flying away from a spot where they have been resting. The reason for this is unknown. Keep an eye out for these beautiful creatures, a signal that spring is finally here.

For information on gardening queries, call the UConn Home & Garden Education Center (toll-free) at (877) 486-6271, visit www.ladybug.uconn.edu, or get in touch with your local Cooperative Extension Center.