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Moths at school



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GREAT COLLECTION: At the Biodiversity Congress

Students of Navodaya Vidyalaya in Kannur, Kerala, find moths a fascinating subject to study.

It's not often one comes across school students interested in moths! Tigers and

lions, yes, maybe even butterflies...but moths? Most people consider them too 'lowly', and anyway as primarily night-creatures, they get paid little attention.

Recently I came across a refreshing departure from this. At the Indian Biodiversity Congress in Thiruvananthipuram (Kerala), as part of the Biodiversity exposition, the Navodaya Vidyalaya, Kannur, had put up several pictures of moths. The Std VII students were proudly showing pictures, and explaining about moths and their work to visitors.

Curious to find out why they had taken up such an unusual activity, I approached a couple of the students. The students explained: "some of us used to watch butterflies and draw them for our art class, and we got interested in moths. One day, we saw this huge moth on campus and we got excited... it turned out to be the Atlas moth, the biggest of India's moths! Since then we have been trying to photograph and keep track of every moth we see on campus."

The school's art teacher, Anupama, has motivated the students to not only enjoy seeing the moths, but systematically document their arrival and stay, and try to identify them. They are now getting help from a few experts for identification. They are also going to develop a 'biodiversity garden' with local plants, to attract more wildlife.

Moths are amongst the most neglected of India's wonderful biodiversity, with no popular field guides and very few experts. This is somewhat surprising, given their bewildering variety, beauty and uniqueness, and the fact that almost anywhere in India, an outdoors light at night is enough to attract a large number of them. May initiatives like this one flourish, to give neglected creatures their due.

Quick facts

A moth is an insect closely related to the butterfly, both being of the order *Lepidoptera*.

Moths form the majority of this order; there are thought to be 150,000 to 250,000 different species of moth (about ten times the number of species of butterfly), with thousands of species yet to be described.

Most species of moth are nocturnal, but there are crepuscular (primarily active during twilight) and diurnal (active during daytime) species.

The study of butterflies and moths is known as lepidoptery, and biologists who specialise in either are called lepidopterists.

As a pastime, watching butterflies and moths is known as butterflying and mothing. The latter has given rise to the term “mother” for one who engages in this activity – sometimes written as ‘moth-er’ to distinguish it from its usual meaning.

Moths frequently appear to circle artificial lights. The reason for this is unknown.

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