

Madera Canyon Species Spotlight

Black Witch

Hiking Madera Canyon trails after the monsoon rainy season starts can be extremely interesting! Besides getting the streams flowing, summer rain promotes seed germination for summer wildflowers, “kick-starts” many insect lifecycles and stimulates animal activity throughout the canyon. One of my favorite monsoon activities is to walk up to the Proctor Trail creek bridges early in the morning to hunt for the “Black Witch”.

Walking across either Proctor bridge, footsteps vibrate the wooden floorboards. If you are the first bridge-crosser of the morning- and lucky- your footfalls may prod a large, dark “bat” to flutter out from underneath and fly rapidly about. But first impressions can be deceiving! This fast-flying bat-lookalike is actually a Black Witch, the largest moth in the United States!

The Black Witch, *Ascalapha odorata*, is a very large, dark-colored moth. Their bat-like profile is the result of size and long, pointed forewings. With a wing-span of 5 to 6 inches, they are the largest Noctuid (Cutworm) moths and the largest moths of any species in North America north of Mexico. Nocturnal like most moths, they fly primarily at night and rest during the day, hiding in shady cooler places out of direct sun- like under bridges, in tree hollows, and beneath the eaves and alcoves on buildings. Rock ledges, caves and old mine tunnels are good places also.

A Black Witch looks uniformly dark when flying at a distance. Close inspection reveals an intricate lacy pattern of dark and light color on a background varying from gray to brown to blackish. There is a shiny dark “eyespot” ringed with yellow on each forewing and a double “eyespot” surrounded by lavender and yellow on the lower edge of each hindwing. Female Black Witch have a distinctive white to pinkish stripe that runs through both the fore and hind wings; this stripe is missing on males. Their cryptic coloration allows them to blend in and almost disappear when resting on tree bark or rock in their natural habitat.

Primarily a tropical species, the Black Witch does live and breed in the warmest southeastern U.S. In the West it is strictly a summer visitor. The seasonal shift in prevailing winds around to the south during the summer monsoon stimulates a northward “migration” from Mexico north into Arizona and on to other states. During summer and fall, these moths have been reported from as far north as Canada following the monsoon air currents north!

Some monsoon seasons in Arizona, the Black Witch is uncommon and seldom seen locally. In “banner years”, they surge up in large numbers and seem to turn up everywhere. During these big years it is not uncommon for Green Valley and other local community residents to discover these unmistakable big moths resting for the day in door alcoves, under porches or awnings- in fact almost anywhere there is a good patch of daytime shade. A rather surprising Black Witch fact is that they apparently do not breed and reproduce often in Arizona, unlike in the south, despite a number of their larval food plants- acacias, cassias, and mesquites, being very common.

So when you are walking around Proctor during the monsoon, or checking out your house, watch for a “big fluttering bat”. It may actually be a bat, of course, but more likely- the Black Witch!



Male Black Witch



Female Black Witch