

The wonders of the Kimberley

A glimpse at its unique environment – ‘Caterpillars to moths’ (by Brian Kane)

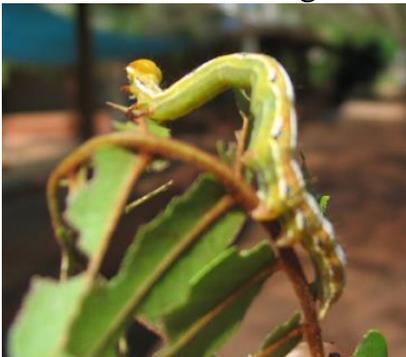


In Australia there are over 10,000 named species of moths and most of their common names are derived from their behaviour or appearance in their caterpillar stage.

We have all heard the expression ‘walk before you can run’ but for moths in the insect world, it is the case of ‘walk before you can fly’. This is quite evident when we come across what is commonly known as ‘processionary’ caterpillars who slowly make their way over footpaths and roadways in a long, hairy, grey chain. During the day large groups of 300 or more of these caterpillars eat leaf litter and when their food runs out they move on. With the ‘safety in numbers’ rule, they form a line and follow each other nose to tail like a miniature freight train - with the added bonus of not getting lost on the way! Their goal is to find a new food source and as they proceed they lay a thin trail of silk while also presenting a formidable number of irritant hairs to predators. Eventually, these caterpillars transform into grey moths with a wingspan of about 4cm.



Another Kimberley caterpillar invades our trees early in the year. They have a particular liking for the Poincianas and keep chomping away until the trees are denuded of foliage. These caterpillars can be a nuisance when they drop



out of the trees onto our backs and over the bonnet of our cars. So what are these blighters? They are Poinciana loopers (*Pericyma cruegeri*) so named because of the way they curl their green and brown bodies in an arch. In time, they turn in small brown moths.

Maybe next time when you are camping in the bush and moths are attracted to your gas light, spare a thought for the unique part they play in our Kimberley environment.