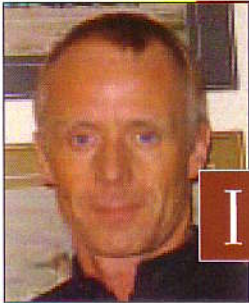


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toxic beauty

by Cyril Brass



It is not always necessary to venture deep into the tropical jungles to find exotic wildlife. This beautiful caterpillar was in the foliage beside a country road just outside a small coastal village in Costa Rica.

It was early afternoon. I decided to take a walk to enjoy another beautiful sunny and hot day. With no set directions, I left the lodge and headed along the dusty road surveying the encroaching vegetation of plants, shrubs and trees.

I kept close to the edge of the road getting as close to the roadside greenery as possible, searching for any types of flora and fauna that I might photograph.

As I followed the winding road up through a dense forest, something caught my eye. On several leaves big chunks were missing. This was evidence that a hungry creature had been in the area or, for all I knew, might still be here. I took a closer look into the vegetation, scanning each plant, vine and bush. Branch by branch, leaf by leaf I examined the area, hoping that whatever ate the juicy leaves would still be close by.

There it was, motionless; a spiny green caterpillar about eight or so centimeters in length, clinging onto a stem of a leaf. I was amazed that I found this caterpillar here, a green creature resting on a green leaf on a green plant on the edge of a green forest. I had never seen a caterpillar anything like this on any of my previous hikes or walks.

As I continued on my walk, I was constantly thinking about this big green larva that I had discovered, wondering what it would metamorphose into. It wasn't until I returned to the lodge, found a computer, and searched on the internet for information on "a large spiny green caterpillar", that I determined this spiny creature was a species of the Giant Silk Moth; the



colorful medium size Automatism IO Moth.

I have yet to see the adult IO Moth. Since moths are primarily nocturnal, a night excursion would be required to find this impressive moth species.

When I found this spiny green caterpillar, I first thought it would be a butterfly larvae since Costa Rica is know for its stunning butterflies; the brilliant blue morph, the large owl eye butterfly or the translucent glass winged butterfly. I never thought of a moth at the time. Yet in this small Central American country there are over 8,000 species of moths.

We all love to watch the fragile beauty of colourful butterflies and moths as they flutter gracefully

though the air. But the caterpillars can be just as stunning and interesting to watch even if they take the forms of alien-like creatures.

Most caterpillars have developed several means of defense. Their appearance can scare away predators or they may choose to release toxins on contact. The bright green IO Moth larvae are covered with clusters of sharp stinging hairs containing venom that is released with the slightest touch.

During the earliest larvae stage, these caterpillars have a deep orange colored body. As it develops, the body turns a bright green; growing clumps of sharp bristles in the process.

These moth larvae are voracious eaters, devouring and storing nutrients for use in later stages of metamorphosis. They consume a variety of plant leaves, not dependent upon a certain plant species as many butterflies are. This allows them to live in a variety of habitats thus distributed in a wide geographical region. There are many subspecies of the IO Moth located from the southern regions of Canada, down through the United States and throughout Central America.

The Automeris IO Caterpillar . . . a non stop eating larvae . . . a bright green spiny creature . . . a beautiful but toxic caterpillar. **ca**

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