



A New Journey Learning the about Woolly Bears

In October of 2020 I received a call from Erika. She had told me that while walking her dogs on a trail near her home she ran across some caterpillars. While some of the caterpillars met their fate under a bike tire, she saved two and brought them home. Erika wanted to identify the caterpillars and what she could do to help them. So begins our journey with the Woolly Bear caterpillars.

As Master Gardeners do, in our conversation, I asked Erika to send me pictures. In doing some research I found that she had two Woolly Bear Caterpillars. These little guys lead quite a life! Many of their caterpillars are fuzzy, earning a group name of woolly bears or woolly worms. The woolly bear du jour is the ultra-familiar rust-and-black-banded caterpillar of the Isabella Tiger Moth (*Pyrrharctia isabella*). The caterpillar has its own names—the generic Woolly Bear, the Black-ended Bear, and the Banded Woolly Bear. *Pyrrharctia* is a monotypic genus—there's only this single species in it (and they're only found in North America). (UW Milwaukee, 2015)



The Woolly Bears are known to hibernate in winter and have been found in little furry balls stuck in ice. Sometimes if the winter is particularly mild they may wake up, forage, and go back in hibernation. Woolly bears have been famous since Colonial times for two things: 1) their habit of crossing the roads in fall and 2) their alleged ability to predict the weather. Those same, road-building Colonists, who needed some forecasting done in those pre-Weather Channel days so they could figure out when to plant and harvest crops, initiated the weather lore angle. If its rust-colored middle band is wide, says the Almanac, the winter will be a mild one; if there is lots of black, batten down the hatches. (UW Milwaukee, 2015)

Therefore, I contacted Erika and shared the information. She was delighted and continued to care for the Woolly Bears. She tells me that she made a small space for them with sticks, leaves, mists them with water, and gently blows on them. In return, they respond to her and stand up to “see” her. I wish her the best of luck and now that I know Woolly Bears are pretty hearty caterpillars, they might live for a while.



Erikas Woolly Bears



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It's in January when I get another call from Erika. We are in the fourth month and I am surprised to find that the Wooly Bears are still alive and well. Erika tells me she was concerned with them because a few nights ago they started acting jittery. The next morning, they were cocoons and there was one cocoon that was smaller. When we did the initial research we found that the Wooly Bear turns in the Isabella Tiger Moth. *Erikas Cocoons*



Tiger moths are in the subfamily Arctiinae, within the family Erebidae, a diverse group that includes about 250 species of tiger, underwing, Zale, tussock moths, etc. in North America and many more worldwide (except Antarctica)... Tiger moths are unusual in that they have an organ on their thorax that vibrates to produce ultrasonic sound. They “vocalize” to attract mates and to defend against predators. If you have sound-making ability, you also need “ears,” and those are on the thorax, too. Like tigers, the adults of many species are hairy and sport bold color patches, stripes or patterns (like the striking, arrowhead-shaped Leconte’s Haploa/Colona moth). (UW Milwaukee, 2015) The average lifespan of the Tiger Moth is about 2 weeks.



So Erika and I are wondering what will happen to the cocoons and how long will they take to open, if they do at all. Again, in February, I was surprised to hear that one of the cocoons did open and Erika had a Tiger Moth! The smaller of the two cocoons did not open and we thought it may have been underdeveloped. According to literature I found on the Internet, the average time it takes to come out of the cocoon is about 21 days or so. We waited almost a month. So, now Erika was a proud parent of a (see picture) Tiger Moth but unfortunately it was too cool to let it out and find a mate.

In March, the Tiger Moth did pass on, but it had a great home and lived longer than expected at 27 days. The whole journey was 6 months of conversations and learning a life cycle.

After the wonderful experience that I got to a small part of, I had to meet Erika. So, in May we had lunch together to talk about our experience and what we learned. Not only did we watch the life cycle of a Wooly Bear/Tiger Moth, but also I have a new friend.

Erika and the empty cocoon



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