

Doon Watch Nature Series for Dehradun Live Hindustan Times by Sanjay Sondhi

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The Atlas Moth

As I strolled down the road on a night walk, a large creature brushed past my face. Instinctively, I ducked, thinking that it was a bat. But on second thoughts, bats don't bump into people walking on roads. They effectively navigate through the night using echo-location, sending out sound waves that allow them to even hunt small insects, so bumping into portly humans (notice, I don't say "fat"! like me isn't gonna happen! Putting on my torch, I looked for the large unidentified flying object that had brushed past my face. The UFO, as it turned out was the Atlas Moth-considered by many to be the world's largest moth!

The Atlas Moth *Attacus atlas* with a wingspan of between 10 to 12 inches is an attractive chestnut brown coloured moth. Its wing markings are exquisite, but the pattern is such that it confuses potential predators, as it's not easy to figure out where the head of the moth is. The moth's name is said to come from its map-like wing markings, resembling an atlas. The large wings of the moth make it a clumsy flier. This fact is often illustrated by numerous scratch marks that the moth's wings have on them, indicated that they have been bumping into more than just humans!



As though being the world's largest moth isn't claim enough to fame, the Atlas Moth has an intriguing story to tell. Firstly, Atlas Moth's have a very short life cycle of only a few weeks. In fact, both sexes of the adult Atlas Moths do not have well developed mouth parts, and hence do not eat during their short life! During

their adult life as a moth, they live on the fat reserves accumulated during its larval stage as a caterpillar. The moth's sole purpose during its adult stage is to breed. Given that they have short lives, the male and female need to "hook up" as quickly as possible. In order to do this, the male moth has large feathery antennae which serve as its sense organs. The female moth lets out a particular scent which the male senses using its antennae. It is believed that the male moth can sense the presence of a female from a few kilometers away. Amazing, isn't it? Imagine college going guys being able to wave a feathery antennae and figure out where the gals are from over a kilometer away! On the flip side, you won't get to eat for a few weeks!

Once the moths have mated, the female lays eggs on certain citrus plants. Green caterpillars with spines emerge in a few weeks, feed voraciously on leaves and eventually spin for themselves a cocoon. From the cocoon, the moth emerges in 3-4 weeks completing the life cycle. An enchanting story, isn't it?

The Atlas Moth is found throughout India and can be seen in Dehradun as well during the summer and monsoon months. So keep your eyes open, and look for this marvelous creature on your next night walk!

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Making a difference: Don't buy decorations such as pinned up butterflies or moths.