

“The first step in intelligent tinkering is to find all of the pieces.” ~ Aldo Leopold

## Marcie O’Connor’s Learning Experiences



*Nursery for bugs. Marcie O’Connor with rearing cage.*

*Photo: Mike O’Connor*

“**T**he more you know about what’s living on your land the better you’ll care for it.” So says Marcie O’Connor, who is taking nature mapping to new heights on the farm she and her husband, Mike, bought in western Wisconsin in 2000. They’ve been tracking everything that grows, flies and crawls following prairie reconstructions on fields that had been cropped for 150 years. They’re also inventorying nature’s comeback on savanna and wetland remnants on what had been a dairy farm nestled in the hills and valleys of Buffalo County in Wisconsin’s driftless area.

You can follow the O’Connors’ progress on their website, [www.aprairiehaven.com](http://www.aprairiehaven.com).

In addition to plants, their inventory lists include mammals, reptiles, amphibians, birds, fungi, lichens, and insects. Insects? Yes, insects. Marcie O’Connor says she’s dedicated to



identifying and photographing every insect species she can, “even if it takes me 100 years,” she jokes. “Insects outnumber all other species,” she points out. “That’s why they’re important. Each time I identify and photograph an insect, I take a new interest in it and its place on our land.”

**HELP FROM BUGGUIDE**

Butterflies have long fascinated O’Connor, who rears them as a hobby. But she didn’t take an interest in other insects until about five years ago. That was when she discovered BugGuide. “The website has played a huge role in building our insect inventory,” she says. “I’ve had lots of help with identifications from the wonderful folks on BugGuide. The website makes almost anything you want to know about insects readily available, and the other neat thing is that it allows you to participate.” O’Connor tells how she’s added to BugGuide’s database by submitting photos of her own insect finds. Some of her submissions marked the first time on BugGuide that such an insect had been recorded in Wisconsin. “I feel I’ve contributed a bit of new information,” she says. “BugGuide is a great resource for landowners wanting to know more about insects on their land and willing to share information.”

O’Connor’s interest in rearing insects---notably butterflies and moths---is also shedding more light on them. “We know relatively little about the life cycles of many insects,” O’Connor says. “What kind of moth or butterfly does that caterpillar turn

into? One way to find out is to rear it yourself and see.”

O’Connor, who has been rearing butterflies for years, explains rearing methods on her website-- from selecting proper plants for food to useful containers for rearing, including glass jars, fish aquariums, and old bird cages. “Watching butterflies and moths evolve from an egg to caterpillar to pupae to adult is educational for people of all ages and great fun as well,” O’Connor says.

O’Connor developed another website devoted to life cycles of insects. It links to life cycles of all kinds of insects, recorded by many different contributors: [www.buglifecycles.com](http://www.buglifecycles.com).

**MOTH KNOWLEDGE GAP**

Moths are O’Connor’s current passion. There are many more kinds of moths than there are butterflies, she points out--- some 10,000 moth species in North America vs. 750 butterfly species. “We know very little about many of the moth species. No one has reared many of the species--- taking them through their life cycle and photographing the stages. It’s a chance for people to close the gap in knowledge about moths.”

Rearing methods are the same for moths as for butterflies. O’Connor’s Prairie Haven website also includes a page about attracting moths for rearing, [www.aprairiehaven.com](http://www.aprairiehaven.com).

She’s also put up a website about moths found all over the world: [www.mothlists.com](http://www.mothlists.com).

“Don’t discount the importance of moths in the food chain,” O’Connor adds. “Many birds depend on their larval stage for

food, especially when feeding babies. That means providing proper host plants and other habitat for moths. There’s much we need to know about these insects.”

**LIFE CYCLE OF A MOTH**

*I captured this female modest sphinx moth (Pachysphinx modesta) on 5/23/2010 (photo 1). I kept her in a cage overnight and she laid about 12 eggs (photo 2). First instar caterpillars emerged on 6/3/2010 (photo 3). They pupated shortly after this caterpillar was photographed on 6/30/2010 (photo 4). I kept the pupae in the refrigerator all winter, and placed them outside in late March, 2011 (photo 5). The adults started hatching in early June. This reared female emerged 6/2/2011 (photo 6). I released her onto a small tree outside of our house, and by the next day she had attracted a mate. ~ Marcie O’Connor*

