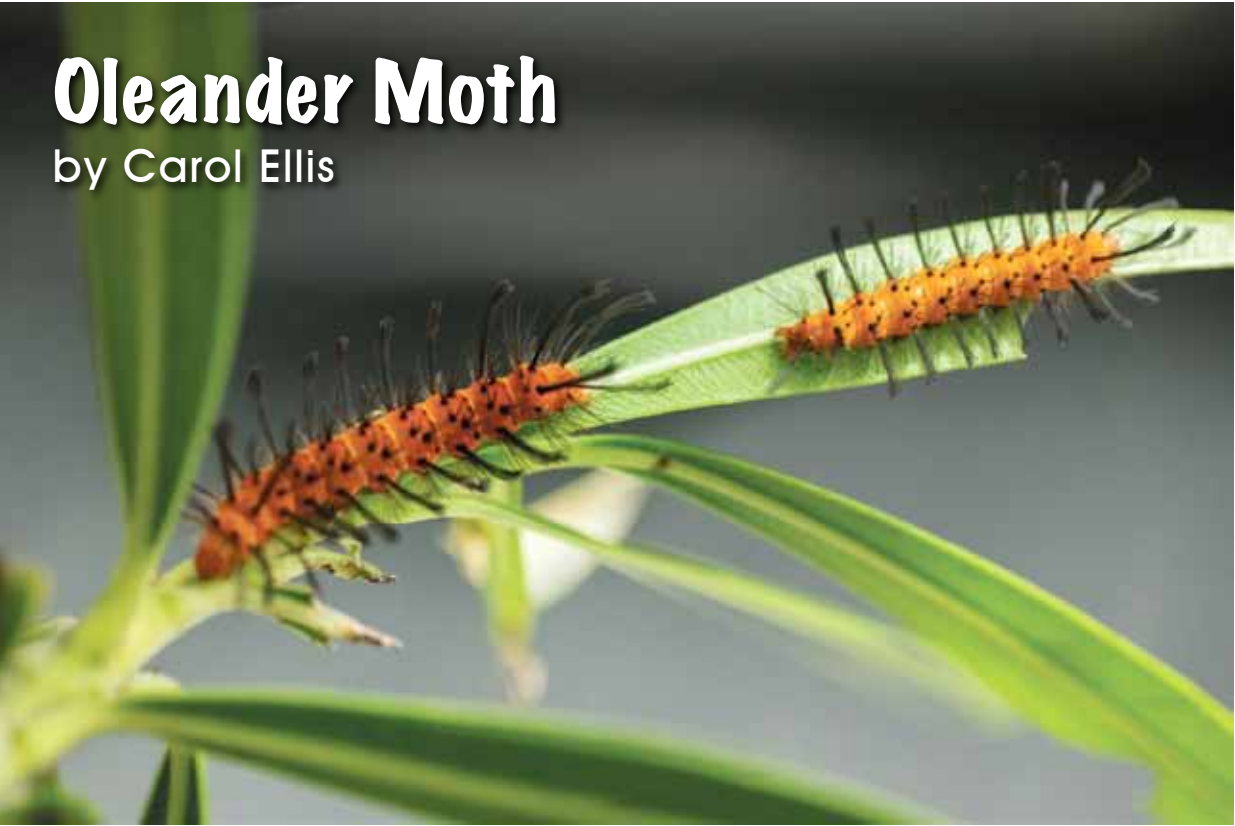




The oleander is the preferred food source for the Oleander caterpillars.

All of what I classify as the important stuff in my life has been learned, one concept at a time, driven by my curiosity. Photography, my career and passion; its concepts were learned by doing. I'd seek out photographers, attend their workshops, and pour over photo books to gain inspiration and learn technique.

Gardening, the same approach; my understanding of the natural environment has evolved one hike, one plant, one critter at a time. The "Education of Carol" is an ongoing and noble cause. My network of "dirty" friends are a good source of information. I can usually rely on my



The orange Oleander caterpillar black hairs mimics stingers. Not so! The hairs do not produce pain unlike certain other hairy caterpillars.

friend, one I fondly refer to as the "barefoot naturalist," when I am looking for info about nature. I asked the naturalist if they'd seen any oleander butterflies? Answering me and correcting at the same time... you mean the Oleander Moth (Syntomeida epilao?) Now that you mention it, I called it a butterfly since it flies during the day, like butterflies do. It really looks more like a wasp, due to its slender wings. Its overall coloration is dark metallic blue with white polka-dots on its wings and upper abdomen and a bright red abdomen.. That's why they call it the Uncle Sam Moth; for its red, white and blue colors. Moths usually are dull brown in color, hairy and generally only come out at night. Butterflies are typically colorful and are easy to spot in the middle of the day gathering nectar from bright blooms. There are butterfly exceptions in the form of the Skipper butterflies, whose wings are mostly brown with patterns of blue, blue-green, orange, beige or white.

"Barefoot" directed me to a location where there was a large oleander growing beside the road. There were Oleander moths chewing the foliage. It looked as if they had been there a day or two since there were plenty of chewed leaves, but overall the entire plant was mostly intact with healthy leaves. Oleander caterpillars can totally defoliate a plant in about a week. After the caterpillar has eaten or skeletonized the leaves, there is no long term damage to the plant, though it won't look so good until new leaves return. This usually gets homeowners upset, so they cut and spray until death do us part.

The Oleander moth is easy to spot by its bright red abdomen. The Oleander plant contains chemicals oleandrin and neandrin which are toxic if ingested. Since the caterpillar feeds on the oleander, the Oleander moth has these chemicals in their bodies, and the moths red abdomen serves as a warning sign: "Do Not Eat Me."

Birds are a great natural predator of caterpillars in the landscape, but birds and small mammals will not feed on the Oleander caterpillar. Its only natural enemies are predatory stink bugs, parasitic wasps and the red imported fire ant.

The orange Oleander caterpillar has another survival mechanism with its clumps of black hairs arising from bumps on its body. The first thing you think of when seeing these hairs is that the hairs are actually stingers. Not so. The hairs do not produce pain unlike certain other hairy caterpillars. I can't wait to tell that to the Comcast technician whose main control box is underneath an oleander tree. It was his complaining and fear of the caterpillars that led me to this research. He's going to feel a lot better about his job.

When you first notice the Oleander caterpillars on the plant, either by seeing the small eggs on the underside of the leaves, or tiny orange caterpillars with black hairs, you can control an infestation by cutting off the affected leaves, and removing from the vicinity of their larval host plants, which also includes the Desert Rose. Ironically, the Oleander caterpillar used to feed

Oleander Moth... CONTINUED - Photos by Carol Ellis.

exclusively on a now rare native plant, the Devil's Potato Vine (Echoes umbellata.) In the 17th Century when the Oleander was introduced here, the caterpillar switched its diet to the oleander. There is a Devil's potato vine in my yard which I am constantly cutting back, and I have never seen an Oleander caterpillar near it. I may move a few caterpillars to my yard and see if they remember that the Devil's potato vine was their original food of choice.

I am a life-long learner. I am blessed that curiosity has led me down numerous paths on this journey we call life. Stay curious, my friend.



The Oleander is an easy to grow shrub or tree whose flowers come in white, pink, red, coral, or yellow, depending on the variety.



The Oleander moth is called the Uncle Sam Moth for its red, white and blue colors.

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The hungry caterpillar can graze the fleshy surface of the leaf, leaving the veins intact or totally consume the leaf. The chewing activity does not produce any long term damage to the plant. Oleander caterpillars can totally defoliate a plant in about a week.



Moths usually are dull brown in color, hairy and generally only come out at night. Butterflies are typically colorful and are easy to spot in the middle of the day. This Mangrove Skipper is a butterfly though its coloration may indicate otherwise.