



# A Guide to Common Caterpillars

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A caterpillar (or larvae) are words used to describe the early stages in the lifecycle of moths or butterflies. Some species are easier than others to identify because of distinctive colours or because they are very hairy however there are a few very good field guides available to help you identify them. We are all used to seeing butterflies in our gardens, but moths belong to the same family – Lepidoptera with most of them flying at night. They are attracted to nectar in the same way as butterflies and therefore are just as important pollinators as butterflies are.

There are four stages in the life cycle, egg – caterpillar – pupa – adult; and the metamorphosis which takes place is when it is in the pupa stage. Some insects grow from larvae to adult by shedding skin to accommodate the growing body. Whereas caterpillars form a case (called a pupa) around themselves where the transformation takes place. Inside this tough case the caterpillar becomes a squidgy mass almost like a thick soup, and reforms into a butterfly or moth shape. Some will over-winter as a pupa and emerge as an adult timed to coincide when the preferred food plants are available. The adult will break through the outer case and climb up a blade of grass or similar and wait for its wings to dry out. Then, the whole process begins again.

Some moths fly by day like the Burnet moths – a black moth with either five or six bright red dots on each wing. Two more common moth seen during the day are the Silver Y, so called because it has a silver Y mark on each wing, and the Broad Bordered Bee Hawkmoth, which is regularly seen flying fast around flowers.



Six-spot Burnet Moth Just emerged



Silver Y Moth



Broad Bordered Bee hawkmoth

There are 59 species of butterflies in the UK and most of us will see several common species in our gardens, but there are 2500 species of moths in the UK! The largest moths are in a family called Hawk Moths, with a wing span up to 9cms. Some of the caterpillars are quite hairy, some are quite thin, many have bright colours and many have distinct defence mechanisms to ward off predators. There is a group of moths called “loopers” because of the way they walk by causing a ‘loop’ shape; and all caterpillars have certain flowers and leaves you can find them on, which they munch through in their quest for nourishment before they pupate.



Eyed Hawk Moth (shown on the hand for size)



Bright coloured and hairy caterpillar



Looper caterpillar

Probably the easiest way we find caterpillars is by chance as one walks across the path in front of us. You could carefully pick it up and move it to safety or take it home with you and put it in a jar with some leaves and wait for it to change. If you are able to identify which species it is, then you can look up on the internet which food plant it feeds on and put those leaves in with it. put a twig in the jar too, as this will give it something to cling to as it pupates; and change the leaves regularly for fresh ones.

Here is one that I hatched out – Elephant Hawk Moth, so called because the caterpillar looks like an elephants trunk.



Caterpillar



Pupa



Empty Case



New Moth Drying its Wings



Adult

### Common Caterpillars

Here are a few caterpillars you may come across. To help you identify any you find, there are a range of Field Study Council (FSC) laminated charts available – **Day Flying Moths, Butterflies, Caterpillars**.

There are also several field guides available to help you – **Field Guide to Caterpillars of Great Britain and Ireland, Caterpillars of the British Isles**.



Cinnabar Caterpillar

The cinnabar caterpillar with its stripes of yellow and black, is probably the one most often seen and recognised. It can be found on ragwort during July and August. The Adult moth is dark grey/black with two pink-red dots and a long pink-red stripe on each wing. Its hind-wings are a deep pink-red.



Adult Cinnabar



## Two Hairy Caterpillars

Hairs are used as a defense mechanism to ward off predators. Therefore take care when handling hairy caterpillars as the hairs can cause a skin irritation.



Fox Moth



Ruby Tiger

## Two Brightly Coloured Caterpillars

Colour can also be used to warn predators, but some bright colours are used as camouflage.



Mullein Moth Caterpillar



Lackey Moth Caterpillar

## Two Hawk Moth Caterpillars

Hawk Moths are the largest moths you will find in the UK, and most of them have a prominent tail spike.



Poplar Hawk Moth



Lime Hawk Moth