

Ceanothus Silk Moth

By Joe Barnwell

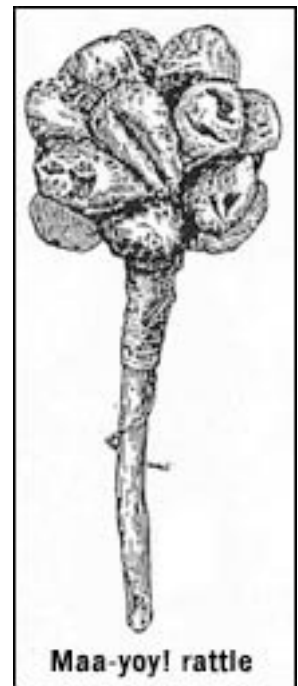


The RVOEP is home to the Ceanothus silk moth, *Hyalophora euryalus*, one of nature's more impressive insects. The moth itself is not too often seen, as it has a short life span and chilly pre-dawn spring habits. It is the cocoon that usually draws human attention.

These cocoons can be quite noticeable attached lengthwise to bare winter shrubbery. They are the size and shape of a small chicken egg, and shine a light gray in the sun. Their silken armor is very tough, and they have been used for millennia by Pomoan and other California Indian groups as ceremonial rattles. The cocoons would be gathered, their occupants evicted, and gravel inserted for sound. They they would be sewn onto ceremonial dress or glued onto a handle to make a rattle. The Eastern Pomo name for both cocoon and rattle is "maa-yoy!".

The Saturniidae (silk moth) family is a hymn to the glory and mystery of life. There are 65 species of these moths in North America, 15 in California. They are all large, strikingly patterned creatures, and include the Luna and Cecropia moths of the East Coast. The Ceanothus silk moth is the western version of the Cecropia. It has 4 1/2 inch wingspan, and its reddish-brown uppersides are marked with white, crescent-shaped slashes and a small eyespot in the corner of the upper wing. Its naked green caterpillar eats and molts its way through the summer to an eventual length of four inches and develops yellow protuberances on its segments in its last stages.

The adults emerge in spring from the cocoons through a visible "neck" at one end, and live but a week or two. Their mouth parts are atrophied and they do not feed. They are out looking for love, and a "calling" female can summon a male from a distance of three miles with her pheromone scent. Many members of the silk moth family are easily raised, and they have been the subject of most pheromone studies. Once the date has been made,



Maa-yoy! rattle

male and female will remain coupled in a day long mating process. The female then visits chaparral and woodland, scattering a few eggs per shrub, up to a final total of about 400.



The cocoons have numerous predators. Woodpeckers and jays can punch through the tough silk, and deer mice, other rodents, ichneumon flies with long ovipositors, ants, and humans also take a toll. About half the Maa-yoy! I find are viable. I spent a month or so recently peering up the skirts of thousands of shrubs in the Mendocino National Forest. I've found most of mine on manzanita, but other ceanothus, poison oak, dogwood, coffeeberry, and live oak have also served. I have found them most everywhere, but they are nowhere common.

They are to be expected from the coast to 3,000 meters in altitude.

I have kept a couple of predated cocoons but leave them alone otherwise. They are a source of life and spiritual traditions that I would rather revere than take. The Web is a rich source of information on the family Saturniidae. A search using "silk moth" can keep you occupied and entranced for hours.