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the owl butterfly

by Cyril Brass



I sensed something was watching from a nearby branch. A creature's eye was staring at me. I stepped forward, cautious not to scare off this unknown creature. I was focused on getting a good photograph of this mysterious being with the evil eye.

Was this the eye of a deadly predator? Or was this the eye of an Owl? Or was it a . . . butterfly?

Yes, it was an Owl Butterfly so appropriately named with the fake eye-spots on the butterfly's wing. With large distinctive eye-spot markings on the undersides of each of the hind wings, the eyes are mistaken for the eyes of an owl. Plus the overall markings and shades of the wings resemble feathers and a face of an owl.

There are two theories as to why this butterfly possesses the fake eyes on its wings.

The first theory is that the fake eyes are used as a defense mechanism to startle would

be predators. The butterfly moves its wings, flashing the 'eyes' at the predator to startle it, enabling the butterfly to escape; appearing to be an owl to protect itself from being eaten.

The second theory is that it is a diversion away from the vulnerable body parts of the tasty Owl Butterfly. It misdirects the attacker away from the creature's vital parts to less important parts like their wings. I have seen several Owl Butterflies with big chunks of their wings missing, still enabling them to fly and survive.

The Owl Butterfly is the largest butterfly species living in the tropical rainforests within Central America and South America, with a wing span of up to 15 centimeters (6 inches).

There must be two types of vegetation in order for the Owl Butterfly to survive in a particular habitat; a host or food plant for the larvae to feed off of to grow, and nectar plants and fruit to provide nutrients for the adults.

The caterpillars of the Owl Butterfly feed only on plants in the banana family such as heliconia, plantain and banana. The larvae have incredible appetites devouring leaves in

great quantities resulting in a quick growing phase to the size of 12-15 centimeters (5-6 inches). During this larva stage, they are 'eating machines', incessantly devouring the leaves of the plants from where they hatched.

Their appearance is somewhat alien looking with a spiked head, fleshy projections along the back and forked tail, yet bizarrely evolving into a beautifully colored butterfly. The adults feed on the sweet juices of rotting fruit and the tasty nectar of blossoming flowers.

Owl Butterflies are reasonably easy to photograph. Due to their size and the owl eye-spots, they are much easier to spot on tree trunks, leaves and flowers. They are most active at dawn and at dusk; their days spent resting on tree trunks and branches.

As well, they are noticeable during flight allowing you to follow (if possible in the rainforest) their irregular flight pattern until they come to rest. They zig then zag effortlessly and peacefully through the tropical air.

It's fascinating to learn and see how nature works in such unusual and mysterious ways.

Adaptation to its natural surroundings is crucial to some of the most delicate creatures on this planet. The Owl butterfly is no exception. Having no razor sharp teeth to bite back with, no claws to scratch with, no poison toxins to emit, or no fowl smell to spew into the air, this creature has an appearance looking more fierce and scary than it actually is.

Camouflage is vital to its survival as well. It is life saving for the Owl Butterfly to blend into its surroundings with tree bark like colors, patterns and markings.

The Owl Butterfly...one of the largest species in the world...a well camouflaged critter...a butterfly in disguise. **ca**

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