


**Local Nature**

by Eric Dinerstein

## Musclewood and Moth

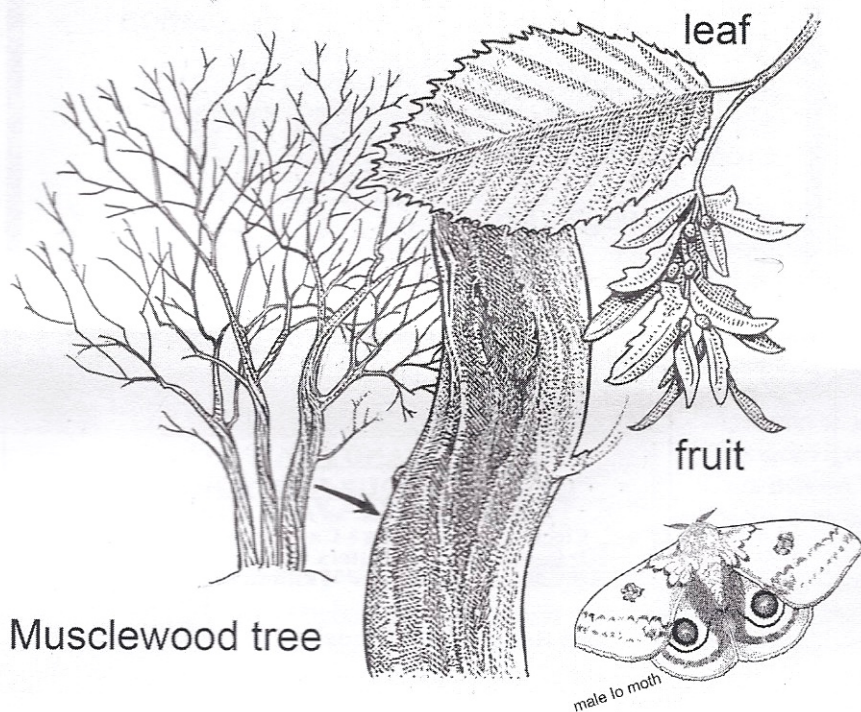
The majesty of trees inspires artists of all kinds. Now that the eastern hardwood forests around Cabin John are ablaze in color, I see local painters seated in front of their easels *en plein air*, capturing the fall glory of a maple, dogwood, beech, or red oak. Winter is the more inspiring season for sculptors, when the trees have shed their leaves, exposing their dramatic architecture, which has been hidden all summer behind the green cloak of leaves.

tree with birch-like leaves—i.e., lots of teeth along the margins—from a quick glance nothing to write home about in terms of aesthetics. American Hornbeam favors the damp soils along the Potomac, but an untrained eye could pass a dozen examples every day on a towpath walk and never notice them. In the fall, the tree stands out a bit more when the leaves turn scarlet, purplish-red, or orange. Yet the amount of foliage is so sparse in comparison to oaks and beech—and the Hornbeams seem to drop their leaves so quickly—that they still go unnoticed.

But once stripped of its foliage, like a boxer shedding his robe before Round 1, the essence of this tree is in full view, and the reason for its other common name—Musclewood Tree—emerges. The thin trunk is fluted with rope-like twists and swerves that resemble the sinewy, rippled look of a superb athlete. Why more sculptors haven't tried to depict the unique trunk of the Musclewood is a mystery to me.

Once you learn this field trait, the Musclewood tree jumps out at you among the pawpaw and dogwood, the common trees of its height class. This tidbit of field taxonomy is a pleasure unto itself, but it also serves as an admission ticket into a larger, even more enjoyable exhibition—the interaction of seemingly unrelated living things in nature—the web of life.

Perhaps the most beautiful species of moth in North America, the Io moth, often deposits its eggs on the leaves of the Musclewood tree. The range of the Io moth overlaps with that of the Musclewood, extending from eastern and southern Canada to Florida, but the moth ranges even farther west to New Mexico and Utah. If you are not out at night under a bug-attracting light in summer you might never see this marvel. Male Io moths have bright yellow wings, while the females are reddish in color. Both sexes have on their hind wing one large black to bluish “eyespot” with some white in the center. This is widely regarded as a defense mechanism to scare off would-be predators. The males have larger, furrier antennae than the females, the better to find them and mate. And like a lot of moths, that is all there is to life. The adults never feed and live no longer than a week or



© Trudy Nicholson

Musclewood tree

Moths are spectacular creatures, too, and worthy of painters' attention in their own right. But when artists train their gaze on the Lepidoptera, it is normally the brilliantly colored butterflies that become their subject matter. Either way, I have often noticed that artists typically see nature, or its building blocks, in isolation, focusing on the individual subject before them rather than trying to depict or bring to life the connection of living, yet unrelated things. Here is my attempt at one such rectifying still life, aided by Trudy Nicholson's illustrations.

One of the most striking trees in our flora is the American Hornbeam (known to science as *Carpinus caroliniana*). It's a thin, short, spreading

two, their sole ambition in life being to procreate. If you do stumble upon one of its offspring—a full-grown caterpillar—stand back and don't touch. The projections from its wriggly green body have a powerful toxin that will sting like the dickens.

The pawpaw and the spicebush, growing side by side with the Musclewood, have Lepidoptera species that oviposit on them, too. But here is a critical difference: the female Zebra swallowtail butterfly only deposits her eggs, one per leaf (as once hatched they are cannibals), on a pawpaw; nothing else will do. And the spicebush swallowtail, a close relative of the tiger swallowtail, will only put her eggs on a—wait for it—spicebush (although the related sassafras is also a good substrate). The Io moth is not such a picky eater: caterpillars will devour the leaves of at least two dozen common trees, shrubs, and herbaceous plants, ranging from mighty oaks, beeches, and red maples, to middling redbuds and flowering dogwoods, down to the minute showy partridge pea. No wonder the Io moth is such a robust flier—as a youngster, it feeds on Musclewood.

Taxonomists catalogue, classify, and even celebrate the building blocks of Nature: trees, moths, shrubs,

butterflies, tigers, elephants, electric eels, parasitic wasps, and nematodes, to list a few components. As the story of the Musclewood and the Io moth shows, often-times in nature, the identification and study of one organism leads to the investigation of the life cycle and appreciation of another, such that one more of nature's marvelous secrets is revealed. Art helps us appreciate the natural world around us; science helps us to look at the larger canvas to discover nature's interconnected stories.



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