

BOGDIVERSITY THURSDAY



—*from Head Naturalist Clinton*

Compton Tortoiseshell and Mourning Cloak

POST #4—September 23, 2021

This week's post is a two-fer! Today, let's take a look at a couple of butterflies with interesting life histories: Mourning Cloak and Compton Tortoiseshell.

Mourning Cloak and Compton Tortoiseshell are two of the handful of species of butterfly that overwinter as adults in Minnesota! This means that these two species are often the last two butterfly species seen during a year, as well as the first two species of butterfly seen during a year. Larry Weber has early observation dates for Mourning Cloak at March 7 (!) and March 22 for Compton Tortoiseshell. Both species can still be seen in late September and October.

Each year, Mourning Cloaks and Compton Tortoiseshells have multiple generations, with the final generation overwintering as adults. Both species utilize similar habitats to overwinter: wood piles, hollow trees, outbuildings, or under the bark of trees. This strategy is much different than other species of butterfly which overwinter as eggs or chrysalises. Some species of butterfly, like

Monarchs and Painted Ladies, migrate to avoid the cold winters of northern Minnesota.

Mourning Cloaks have fantastically interesting life histories. The second generation of the season emerges, feeds, and then estivates (sort of a mini-hibernation) only to wake up after a couple of months, feed some more and then overwinter! This means some adults can live up to a year. Their caterpillars have interesting biology as well. Mourning Cloaks lay their eggs in bunches on willows. All of the caterpillars stick close together after they hatch, feed and grow, and then migrate away from food plants en masse to pupate. These caterpillars can and often defoliate smaller trees.

Not to be outdone, Compton Tortoiseshells are only found in the boreal forest (from the west to the east coast) and very rarely nectar on flowers, preferring to use early season sap leaking from deciduous trees or from the wells made by sapsuckers! This species is prone to population booms and during those years it may stray north or south.

More information is included in the photos below!
(Photos by Head Naturalist Clinton)



The underwing pattern of a Mourning Cloak is seldom seen, as they prefer to bask with their wings open. Their cryptic patterns help them hide from predators.



A very widespread species, Mourning Cloaks are found from coast to coast and as far north as Northern Alaska and as far south as Northern Mexico!



Compton Tortoiseshells are unique in their name, not being named for a state or a person, but for a county (Compton County, Quebec, Canada)!



This Compton Tortoiseshell was photographed March 20 by Head Naturalist Clinton at the Welcome Center this spring! Lately, a number of Compton Tortoiseshells have been scoping out potential locations to overwinter at the Welcome Center.