

BOGDIVERSITY THURSDAY



—*from Head Naturalist Clinton*

Commas

POST #27—April 28, 2022

Biodiversity Thursday post #4 featured two butterfly species that overwinter as adults: Mourning Cloak and Compton Tortoiseshell. These two species are usually the first two butterflies seen in the spring, but there six other butterfly species that overwinter as adults in our area. Today, we feature four of those species!

The commas are a cryptic group of early season butterflies that should be emerging sometime soon! The name "comma" comes from the bright silver, comma shaped mark in the middle of the hindwing. These butterflies have more than one brood in the season, but the first group we see in the spring have successfully overwintered.

Gray Comma is far and away the most common species of comma in the Sax-Zim Bog. This species has a very narrow comma and emerges in the spring in April and early May. As an adult, this species seldom nectars on plants, but prefers sap and even carrion for nutrients! It's main host plant in our area is gooseberry.

Eastern Comma is the second most common comma in the Sax-Zim Bog, but might be the most common comma in areas south of us! They usually begin flying around the 20th of April in our area. Interestingly enough, this species may aestivate (a short hibernation period) during periods of extreme heat!

To contrast the common Gray Comma, the beautiful Green Comma is very hard to find! This species also has a very narrow comma, but has a strongly jagged edge to the wing often with green, gray, and brown markings. It has similar food needs as Gray Comma, but lays eggs on a number of woody shrubs, like alders and willows.

The last comma to note today is actually not named comma at all! Question Mark is a large butterfly, at least compared to other commas, and is strongly associated with wet habitats. The "comma" on their hindwing is broken, giving it a ? shape! A stunning species, the last brood of the season shows a beautiful pink color on the underside.

All of the overwintering butterfly species require specific conditions to overwinter, especially wood piles, dead trees, and leaf piles.

More information on these species below!

(Photos of most species by Sparky Stensaas, with Green Comma photo by Head Naturalist Clinton)



While the commas have distinctive undersides, the topside of these butterflies all look very similar! From one species to next there might only be slight differences in pattern, with very little difference in color. To ID these butterflies, it is helpful to get a look at the underside.



Gray Comma is very cryptic, with a narrow gray comma on its hindwing. Sometimes, this mark can be very hard to see!



Eastern Comma has a more hook-shaped comma on its hindwing and tends to be brown or tan on its undersides. This species is variable, with the overwintering brood being different in color than the summer brood!



Green Comma is absolutely beautiful! Some have wonderful green marbling like this individual, while others may be more gray or brown. They have a narrow comma, like Gray Comma, but their wing edges are much more jagged.



Question Mark gets its name from the broken comma on the hindwing, which resembles a question mark. This species winter brood (the last brood of the season which will overwinter) is often quite pink, like this individual!