

Care guide

Hercules Moth Caterpillars, *Coscinocera Hercules*



Hercules Moth caterpillars are the larvae of the Hercules Moth, Australia's largest moth species. The adult moth can have a wingspan of 27cm. Hercules moths are found in tropical north Queensland and New Guinea. The adult moths do not feed as they have no mouthparts, and are short lived. The adult male have the rear corners of the hindwings stretched into long tails.

Adult female moths will lay up to 300 ovaloid orange coloured eggs on or near the caterpillars preferred foodplant. They feed on several rainforest trees, but prefer the leaves of the Bleeding Heart Tree, *Omalanthus sp.* The caterpillars emerge from the egg after around 14 days and look like tiny white toothbrushes. They are very enthusiastic eaters and begin feeding immediately.

The caterpillars undergo six moults before they reach the size at which they pupate. They will often eat the shed exoskeleton after it has moulted. It takes around two to three months before they reach this size. By this time, the caterpillars are around 12cm long, and weigh 29g.

When they are ready to pupate, the caterpillar will construct a silk cocoon around itself, into which the caterpillar retreats and transforms into a pupa. The pupae can take from a few months to a few years to emerge as an adult moth.

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Food: Fresh healthy leaves from the Bleeding Heart Tree, *Omalanthus sp.* – ensure fresh leaves are always available for your insect. Don't let the leaves dry out or wilt before you change them. The leaves can be put into a jar of water to keep them fresh for as long as possible. Make sure the jar has a lid or covering with holes in it to stop the caterpillars from falling or crawling in and drowning.

Water: Caterpillars get most of their moisture via the leaves, but do sometimes require additional moisture. Mist-spray the leaves around your caterpillar once a day – it will drink the droplets if it requires extra moisture.

Enclosure: A suitable enclosure should allow for some ventilation and allow for humidity to be kept at a reasonably high level. Minimum size requirements are 35cm high x 30cm wide x 30cm deep. Place the enclosure in a spot where it gets a bit of daylight each day, but be careful it doesn't over heat in direct sunlight.

Life span: Caterpillars – 2-3 months. Adult moth – 4-5 days

Temperature: This species will do best at 22 – 28° C, but will tolerate slightly lower temperatures and have a slower growth rate.

Humidity: The humidity should be kept around 60-90% within the enclosure if possible. A lower humidity can result in moulting difficulties, which can result in death.

Handling: The caterpillars are harmless and so are able to be handled, however great care needs to be taken when coaxing them off their branches/leaves. Caterpillars have 6 true legs, and 4 pairs of sucker feet at the end of their bodies. These sucker feet can grip on quite tightly, and care must be taken not to damage them. At the very end of their body, they have 2 large claspers with false eye spots on them that grip very strongly onto the branches. These cannot be forced off without causing damage to the caterpillar, so you will have to be patient while the caterpillar climbs onto your hand.

Reproduction: It is difficult to breed the adult moths. Usually males and females have different pupal emergence times, so it can be difficult to pair them up. The adults only live for a few days.

Common issues: The caterpillars will sometimes climb down into the water container for the leaves and drown if it is accessible, so ensure they cannot get into the water. You may like to use mesh to cover the water, or paper towel to block up any gaps. The caterpillars may also have problems moulting if the humidity is not high enough.

NOTE: These animals should not be released into the wild.