

Moth mystique

BY LYNN SAXBERG

Most people don't notice anything special about moths, if they notice them at all. But Ottawa's Jim des

Rivières is so passionate about highlighting the beauty of the common night-time insect that he braves bears, sleep deprivation and the National Capital Commission to collect photo-worthy specimens.

In a new exhibit of des Rivières' large-format photographs opening this week at the Canadian Museum of Nature, moths appear to be remarkably exquisite creatures. Each poster-size image explodes with vibrant colours, fascinating patterns and intricate details.

These are not strange, exotic moths from a tropical jungle. They are part of the same family of insects that flocks to your back porch when you leave the light on at night.

"Everybody is familiar with the butterflies," says des Rivières.

"They've got the popular press. But it turns out that our moths are actually every bit as beautiful as butterflies. I would say more beautiful."

The 57-year-old Ottawa native, who works for IBM as a software architect, became fascinated by the photographic potential of moths nearly 10 years ago while helping out at Carleton University's biology department. Around that same time, he and his wife, visual artist Kathryn Finter, were experimenting with a flatbed scanner, creating digital images of flowers, fruit, vegetables or anything else that caught their eye. He borrowed some butterfly specimens to scan and liked the results. Jayne Yack, a biology professor, suggested he try scanning moths.

"She mentioned that moths were like the poor cousins of butterflies and no one knew about moths, but there are actually 10 times as many moths as butterfly species," des Rivières says. Of the estimated 2,000 species of moths in the Ottawa area, des Rivières has photographed about 300. The new exhibit includes 46 species.

In his early years of moth fancying, des Rivières devised a mobile moth-collecting unit with a black light, 12-volt battery, inverter, white sheet and an old tripod. The entire rig fit into a laundry hamper. He would head out of the city about 10 p.m. on a summer night to catch the peak of moth activity, generally between 1 and 3 a.m. Gatineau Park and Mer Bleue Conservation Area were prime destinations, but it's illegal to remove anything from a protected area, even a moth. Fortunately, the NCC granted permission for des Rivières to collect his specimens.

There were also wildlife encounters, including the time on Meech Lake Road when a bear lumbered over to check out the rig. Des Rivières and Finter watched from the safety of the car until the bear left.

"I was burning the candle at both ends," des Rivières says. "I've never had a hobby that's gotten me out in the forest in the middle of the night. More species are farther out of town because there's less light. It's actually a very beautiful time to be out."

Occasionally, des Rivières is able to collect urban moths. While enjoying a beer on the patio of a Sparks Street pub, for example, Finter noticed a moth on a nearby wall. They asked the waitress for a to-go container and brought the insect home. Other moths have been presented by neighbours who live in the same downtown condo building.

Des Rivières first exhibited his



WANNE CUDDINGTON, THE OTTAWA CITIZEN

Jim des Rivières has been tramping through forests at night for years, collecting moths, yet he's only captured a fraction of the 2,000 or so species found in this area. His remarkable images are featured in a new exhibit at the Canadian Museum of Nature.

massive moth images during the annual butterfly open house at Carleton University. This year's live butterfly show, which runs until Oct. 12, features one of des Rivières' butterfly images, as well as 60 different species of Ottawa-area butterflies captured in their natural habitat by another Ottawa photographer, Rick Cavasin.

Back at the museum, des Rivières pointed out his favourite moth in the latest exhibit. It's *autographa bimaculata*, the two-spot-

ted looper. In real life, its wing span is less than two inches. From six feet away, the image shows a plain brown moth with a couple of white spots. Move in a few feet, though, and every hair on the creature becomes visible. There's a feathery fringe around the edge of the wings, and the colouring includes shades of pink, mauve, green and orange.

"It's like a tapestry," says des Rivières. "We can't normally see these colours. Our eyesight isn't

good enough. These moths have been the biggest surprise for me. I think they're small brown moths with nice silver spots. Only when I'm going through identifying them and getting them ready to do prints, then I look at it in full size. These are the ones that totally surprised me.

"These are all hidden beauties in a sense because we're daytime creatures and they're nighttime creatures and we don't come across them."

Exhibit: Moths at Large,

photographs by Jim des Rivières
Where: Canadian Museum of Nature, 240 McLeod St.

When: Oct. 8-Jan. 9

Vernissage: 6-8:30 p.m. Oct. 7

Tickets: Free with museum admission
Learn more: www.moths.ca

VIDEO WEBKEY: Watch Jim des Rivières hang his photographs at the Museum of Nature at ottawacitizen.com