# Where a Texas Mourning Cloak Spends the Summer

*A Mourning Cloak butterfly,* Nymphalis antiopa*, roosting in the storage shed at the Biology Station.*

LOST PINES NATURE NOTES
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Butterflies are surprisingly resilient and adaptable critters. How resilient and adaptable was brought home to me a couple of weeks ago by an encounter in, of all possible place, a storage shed.

Despite the popular misconception that butterflies are the "height of frivolity," they need and do most of the same things that all animals do and can provide remarkable insights on animal behavior. Take, as an example, the need to avoid, or even survive through, environmental extremes such as winter, heavy rainfall events, and the burning sun of a Texas summer.

Birds and, yes, some butterflies, will migrate away from the cold winter snows of a North Woods winter but well known animals like bears, beavers, reptiles, and even some—wait for it!—butterflies, will hibernate through the adverse conditions. One of the more famous hibernating butterflies is the Mourning Cloak, *Nymphalis antiopa*, a large dark butterfly with the characteristic white/gold funereal edges once common on, or at least so I'm told (since I ain't that old yet), cloaks worn during mourning.

This enigmatic butterfly finds a haven like a woodpile, loose tree bark, or a vacated woodpecker's nest and "goes to sleep" through the worst of the winter, often emerging on the odd warm sunny days of mid-winter while there's still snow on the ground. You'll just have to trust me when I tell you that seeing a butterfly flying above the snow in mid-winter is a sight for sore eyes!

A suite of other adaptations help at such times, including the ability to "shiver" to get frozen wing muscles loosened up, then bask in the weak winter sunshine to get up to flight temperature (often up to 40F or so above ambient), and to be a sap-feeder that can take advantage of the wounds from fallen limbs. It helps also to be territorial (bet you never thought of butterflies as defenders of territories before, eh?) and to be predisposed to hanging around woods and trees by using caterpillar host plants like willow, poplar and cedar elm.

It may not seem immediately apparent but similar conditions (temperature extremes and high desiccation levels) occur in high summer in some places, including (gasp!) Texas. Perhaps you can imagine our surprise when Pat and I were moving some boxes around in the large storage shed here at the Biology Station and Pat said "well, would you look at that!"

"That" was a Mourning Cloak butterfly perched head-down on the side of a cardboard box a couple of inches above the relatively cool concrete floor. There was a flurry of sightings of these butterflies in Bastrop Co. in mid-spring before they all disappeared. Brush Freeman of Utley asked me, "where did all the Mourning Cloaks go?"

The answer, of course, is they didn't go anywhere—they're still here! On Saturday, along with my first fall Monarch of the season, I saw this butterfly (recognizable by the distinctive damage along the wing edges) out feeding at the banana feeders. Mission accomplished (apologies to George W.)!

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