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## Butterflies are free

### Biology professor's Web sites are a lepidopterist's delight

**J**ohn Snyder has an unusual hobby. Almost every day you can find the Furman biology professor surfing the Internet, searching for and meticulously categorizing images of insects. Moths and butterflies, to be more exact.

From a nondescript office on the second floor of Plyler Hall, he maintains the world's largest on-line collection of moths and butterflies. "Web Images of North American Moth Species" is accessible at <http://www.furman.edu/~snyder/leplist>.

The site contains close to 2,000 links to photographs of moth and butterfly species, both caterpillars and adults. For lepidopterists, who study these insects, the site is a gold mine. But Snyder doesn't stop there. Hundreds of Web sites containing information on moths and butterflies are also linked from another page that he oversees — the Lepidopterists' Society home page (<http://www.furman.edu/~snyder/snyder/lep>).

Together, these two sites are arguably the world's leading resources for butterfly and moth enthusiasts. Snyder, who has maintained the moth images page for nearly two years, painstakingly logs each link and constantly reviews the many on-line pages, looking for dead links and other imperfections.

North America alone has more than 10,000 species of butterflies and moths, and entomologists are discovering more all the time. So attempting to catalogue them all is kind of like swimming against a tide, says Snyder, who has taught at Furman since 1971.

"The site will probably never be complete," he says. "The ideal site would have links to all species and would include a search engine."

But such tiny imperfections don't seem to bother amateur and professional entomologists worldwide who have made the site their regular rest stop on the information superhighway.

In fact, Snyder fields at least one unsolicited e-mail query a day from the



*For John Snyder, exploring the world of insects represents both a research interest and a source of enjoyment. While maintaining his Web sites, he is involved in an ongoing survey of lepidoptera specific to Northwest South Carolina.*

public, most of them seeking to identify a species of butterfly or moth. During the summer, when the insects are most active, the number of daily electronic questions reaches five or six.

Snyder's favorite question arrived last summer, when an Army recruit from Idaho sent an e-mail with an urgent request. It seems that her drill sergeant had found a dead moth in an area she was responsible for keeping spotless.

"The drill sergeant told her that unless she could identify the species of the discovered moth within 24 hours, she was going to have to bury the insect with full military honors," says Snyder with a laugh. "I gave her a real technical sounding name. I guess it satisfied the sergeant."

Snyder's fascination with lepidoptera was sparked by a science teacher at Kent Junior High in Akron, Ohio, who required the class to compile a collection of insects.

"I categorized and named them. That's when I first came to realize that there was so much diversity," says Snyder, who is also the curator of Furman's insect collection (<http://www.furman.edu/~snyder/butterfly>). "I think I even won a ribbon for my collection at a science fair."

Snyder attended Case Western Reserve University, where he majored in biology. He earned his master's and Ph.D. degrees in zoology at the University of Michigan in Ann Arbor.

By the 1980s, after more than a decade of studying antibacterial enzymes of amphibians, Snyder renewed his boyhood interest in insects. His current research, which focuses on fluorescent molecules found in moths, combines his background in molecular biology and entomology.

— John Roberts