



Natural History Snippets

Sri Lanka Natural History Society

A PROBLEM OF IDENTITY

Brown Tussock Moth or Cocoa Tussock Moth?

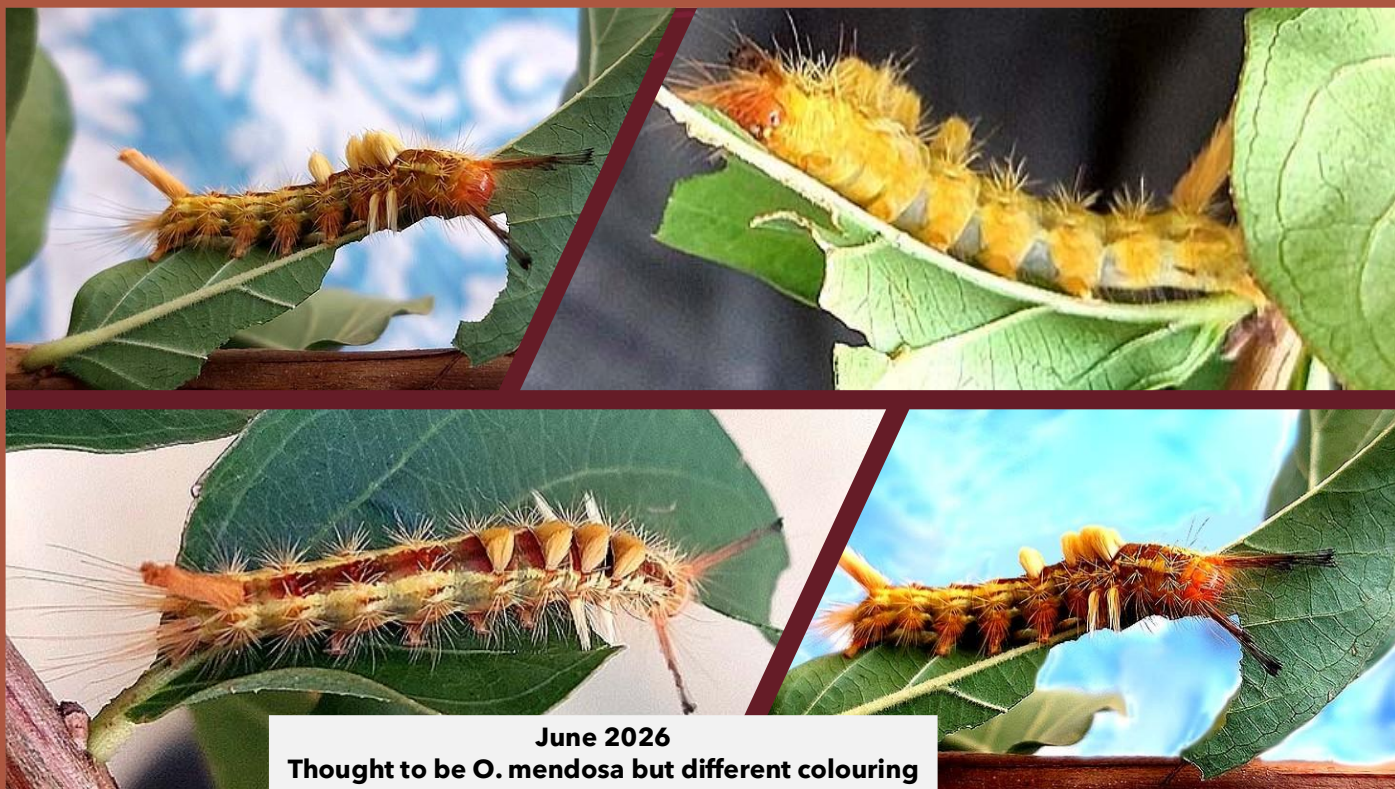
In September of last year I found a beautiful caterpillar chomping away at the leaves of my water lily plant. It was identified by an SLNHS member as the larva of the moth *Olene mendosa* (images below). I did not see the later stages



September 2025
Olene mendosa caterpillar



Fast forward to 2026 June, when we decided to prune an overgrown Bonnet flower tree (*Lagerstroemia indica*) or Cape myrtle. A number of caterpillars were found on the cut branches. As the tree is very tall, we had been unable to see what was going on amongst the foliage in the intact tree. Although similar to the *Olene mendosa* caterpillar in many features the colouring was different, being paler with the hair pencils (the erect pegs at the rear end) being white and not black (image page 2).



On June 30th cocoons started appearing and on the 3rd July the first adult appeared. Many followed soon after, the last being on the 7th July. They were small – 2.5 to 3 cm



The first moth that appeared was photographed through the glass of the cage, showing the underside (top row, at right). The dorsal aspect is at top left (through glass), and with the background removed, below.

July 7th 2026



The last adult emerged on the 7th and posed for a photograph on a leaf. Its wings were held closer together, but the colour and pattern were similar to the earlier image. The beautiful comb-like antennae can be seen clearly. The first pair of legs are held straight out in front. Comparison with the image of *Olene mendosa* in Nuwan Chaturanga's 'Handbook to the Moths of Sri Lanka' did not produce a match—raising a question mark regarding identity.

But I was already facing a bigger question that had emerged on the 4th July.

What on earth was this?



This animal had appeared on a branch on the 4th July. To my utter amazement it soon proceeded to lay eggs. So it wasn't the larva of something



Egg laying started on the 4th July. A small cluster was deposited first, followed by a pause.



When next observed on the 5th, a large cluster was seen covered in hairs from the female's body, together with a smaller group. The female was beside the clusters denuded of its covering of hairs.



Enter Priyantha Wijesinghe, our colleague in the USA.

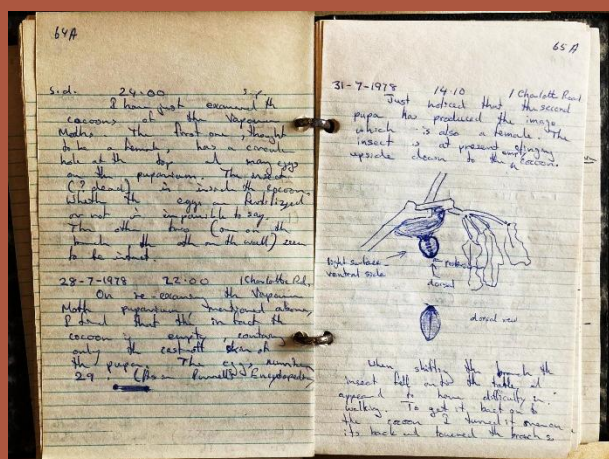
I had been discussing with him about the identity of the 2026 caterpillars, as they were of a different colour from the one seen the previous year. When I shared pictures of the unexpected egg-laying insect, he informed me about the Vapourer moth that he had observed in 1978 in England. That species, *Orgiia antiqua*, had flying males and flightless females. So, what I had observed was a flightless female that had emerged from one of the cocoons and had mated with one of the emergent males. Priyantha was also kind enough to share with me the relevant pages from the Handbook of

Moths relating to *Olene mendosa* as well as the contact details of Nuwan Chaturanga.

Flightless females are not reported for *Olene mendosa*; but are documented for *Orgiia antiqua*. So, a search for Asian species of the genus *Orgiia* turned up *O. postica* - the cocoa tussock moth. Its larva is of similar colouration to my 2026 caterpillar, has wingless females and is distributed in SL. The Adult male does not quite match my ones, but I am leaving further study to the experts. I am awaiting Nuwan Chaturanga's views on this moth.

***“Orgiia postica*, the cocoa tussock moth or hevea tussock moth, is a species of moth of the subfamily Lymantriinae of the family Erebidae found in the Oriental tropics of India, Sri Lanka, Myanmar, Borneo, Java, New Guinea, and Taiwan. It was described by Francis Walker in 1855.^[1]”**

- <https://www.inaturalist.org/taxa/199438-Orgiia-postica>



Priyantha Wijesinghe's handwritten note-book describing the Vapourer moth that he observed in 1978.

An Idea

There are many *Lagerstroemia* plants in the vicinity of my house that are of a height making them easily examined. On the centre reservation of C. W. W. Kannangara Mawatha (Alexandra Place) along the eastern boundary of the Colombo Town Hall and at Independence Square, along the pavement bordering the entrance to the Arcade. My suggestion is that SLNHS members band together to observe these plants for presence of the caterpillars of this moth.

Anyone interested?

Article and photography by Malik Fernando

With help from

Priyantha Wijesinghe

27 July 2026