Mourning Cloak

Scientific Name: *Nymphalis antiopa* (Linnaeus)

Order: Lepidoptera (Butteflies, Moths, Skippers)
Family: Nymphalidae (Brushfooted Butterflies)

Identification and Descriptive Features: The mourning cloak is a large butterfly with a wingspan of 2 1/4 - 4 inches (5.7 - 10.1 cm). The upper wing is purple-black and slightly reflective of purple and with bluish spot markings. The



Figure 1. Mounring cloak, upper wings of adult.

underside of the wings are less brightly colored, being a dark brown that allows it to camouflage against bark. A yellowish band edges the irregular border of the wings. The overall dark

coloration of this species inspires the common name for this species, as it resembles a dark colored cloak used by a person in mourning.

The caterpillars are velvety-black and covered with fleshy spines. They typically feed in groups, chewing leaves of their host plants. The larvae of the mourning cloak are sometimes referred to as "spiny elm caterpillars", although elm is only one of the larval host plants.

Distribution in Colorado: Statewide in association with the various trees that serve as larval host plants. Most common in wooded areas of deciduous trees and often seen in residential neighborhoods.

Life History and Habits: The mourning cloak is one of the very few butterflies that survives winter in the adult stage. Their dark colored wings allow them to absorb heat energy after sunning and they may be seen flying on warm days in late winter and early spring. Typically the males will perch in sunny openings, darting out when a female or intruding male passes. Mating occurs in spring.



Figure 2. Feeding group of mourning cloak caterpillars (aka "spiny elm caterpillars) Photograph by Matt Camper.



Figure 3. Chrysalis (pupa) of the mourning cloak.

The eggs are laid as a mass of several dozen that encircle small branches or twigs. The caterpillars that hatch feed as a group and produce an inconspicuous silk pad. Hackberry, willow, aspen, poplars, cottonwood, and elm are all common host plants used in Colorado. The caterpillars feed on the leaves, sometimes stripping the foliage from individual branches but producing little injury to plants. Development of the caterpillars may take a month or more to complete, depending on temperatures.

When full-grown in June or early July they pupate, producing a gray-colored spiny chrysalis that hangs from the tip of the abdomen. A couple of weeks later the new adult butterflies emerge, which are present from late June through early July.

Adults of the mourning cloak primarily feed on tree sap and, in summer, on rotting/overripe fruit. Rarely do they visit flowers for nectar. After a few weeks of feeding the summer-produced adults go into a dormant state for overwintering, finding winter shelter under loose bark flaps or other protected sites. With the single generation/year life cycle and extended adult dormancy through winter, the mourning cloak is among the longest lived of all butterflies.

Special Note: The mourning cloak was established as Montana's official state butterfly in 2001.



Figure 4. Mourning cloak pair prior to mating in mid-April.



Figure 5. Mourning cloak showing underwing markings.