

Garden Tiger *Arctia caja* (Linnaeus)

The Garden Tiger (wingspan 28-37mm) is a particularly striking moth that can vary quite considerably in terms of the patterns on its wings, so that no two moths are identical in appearance. The forewings are extensively decorated with patterns of brown and white or cream blotches. When in flight the bright orange abdomen is revealed with hindwings that are usually orange in colouration, decorated with blue/black spots that vary greatly in size and position on the wing. Unusual forms are occasionally found in the wild such as those with a yellow or brown abdomen and hindwings. Some may lack spots entirely.



Photograph Alan Barnes/Butterfly Conservation

The Garden Tiger moth possesses chemicals that can be excreted from ducts behind the head when disturbed by potential predators. This fluid is yellow in colour and in combination with the display of the bright orange hindwings and black spots, emits a powerful signal to predators that it is distasteful and not a good idea to eat! These chemicals can be taken in from the food, like cardiac glucosides from foxgloves. However, the Garden Tiger is able to manufacture some toxins, including histamines, which may be combined with sequestered chemicals, in its defence against predators.



Photograph Butterfly Conservation

The caterpillars of the Garden Tiger are more affectionately known as the 'woolly bear', referring to the dense furry hair that coats the body. These caterpillars can sometimes be found during the day from August to June, feeding on a variety of flowers including common nettle, docks and other garden plants, or basking in the sunshine and, when fully grown (at around 60mm in length), searching for a suitable site in which to pupate.

The adults emerge from July to August and fly late at night, and are attracted to light, which is likely to be the best opportunity to see the adult moth. The Garden Tiger is widespread throughout Britain but numbers have decreased in recent years, possibly due to the loss of weedy areas and the treatment of hedgerows, where the foodplants normally occur. Other habitats in which the Garden Tiger can be found include gardens, wetland areas, open woodland and sand dunes. Recent studies have shown, however, that a trend of mild, wet Januarys followed by colder Februarys may be partially to blame for the decline of the Garden Tiger moth, and if so, this trend looks set to continue into the future with the onset of climate change.