

## The Stealthy Shenanigans of the Camouflaged Looper

by Erika West, Master Gardener Volunteer



### From blazing star to goldenrod to aster, this trickster changes costume from one flower to the next

Fall is here—maple trees are taking on shades of red and orange, amsonia hubrichtii is turning a golden hue and the ever-important fall asters are blooming in shades of blue, purple and pink.

In dining rooms and craft rooms across the county, our crafty neighbors (maybe it's you!) are getting out their snips and sewing machines to bring little goblins, witches and Pooh Bears to life for Halloween.

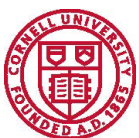
It may seem like a uniquely human act to don a costume, but, in fact, it is not. One of the tiniest members of our ecosystem is a master at the art of costume! Allow me to introduce you to the camouflaged looper.

The camouflaged looper, *Synchlora aerata*, known in its adult stage as the wavy-lined emerald moth, is a tiny inchworm that feeds on and camouflages itself with flower parts. As the looper visits a flower to eat, it chews off petals, ray flowers and, sometimes, entire flowers, and affixes them to its back to create a floral disguise. The looper's gelatinous spit helps flower parts maintain turgor and adhere to spiky, raised spines on its back. If a flower part does wilt or fall off, it is quickly replaced. Even more amazingly, the looper changes its costume entirely as it moves from one flower species to another, thus ensuring it always blends in with the flower on which it is feeding. This adaptation allows the camouflaged looper to eat from an extensive list of plants while avoiding detection by predators. Which brings us back to asters ...

For your best shot at seeing this disguise virtuoso in your own garden, plant asters. The camouflaged looper overwinters as larva and, like so many other beneficial insects, will need late-blooming members of the Asteraceae family to build up its reserves for winter. It has been observed feeding on over a dozen plants in the Asteraceae family, including blazing star, goldenrod, aster, rudbeckia, coreopsis, fleabane and boneset.

If you want to see the looper after it has made its final costume change to wavy-lined emerald moth, keep an eye out from June to August—particularly at night. A nocturnal flier, the wavy-lined emerald is as elusive in wing as in its caterpillar stage. Like other nocturnal moths, it is attracted to light and may be found clustered around lit entryways. While this may make the moth easier to spot, too much artificial light is disruptive to insect processes and increases vulnerability to predators. You can learn more about the importance of dark skies at our upcoming presentation at Cold Spring Farmer's Market on Oct. 12.

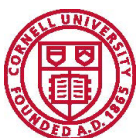
If you're in need of a costume idea this year, let the camouflaged looper inspire you! Wouldn't he make a fantastic—and educational—costume?



**References:**

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