



The End of the Peppered Moths as an Argument for Evolution by Warren Krug (November-December, 1999)

One of the most widely-quoted proofs for evolution, which in reality was no proof at all, is now apparently in serious trouble. Scientists are quietly admitting that the famous pepper-moth experiments are “essentially useless.”¹

The Peppered Moths

According to this famous story, back in the 1850s a variety of moth called the peppered moth (*Biston Betularia*) could be found in abundance in England. There was only one variety of this moth— basically a white moth but one which was “peppered” with dark spots. It often rested on the trees where it could blend in with the mottled gray lichen that covered the barks of the trees. This bit of camouflage made it hard for birds to spot it and eat it and consequently the peppered moths flourished.

However, along came the Industrial Revolution and the resulting increase in pollution. The pollution eventually killed much of the gray lichen on the trees, thus revealing the much darker tree bark beneath it. The gray moths now could be easily spotted and eaten by birds and their numbers plummeted.

Fortunately, a mutant moth arose, or so goes the story. This new peppered moth was much darker in color, and it now could blend in well with the darkened bark of the trees. Now it was camouflaged and its numbers rapidly increased. Before long, the percentage of peppered moths that were dark in color approached 100.

By the 1950s Clean Air Acts had been passed and the pollution from factories dropped dramatically. Not only did the lichen make a comeback but so did the lighter gray peppered moths because once again they could enjoy protection as they rested against the trees whose bark was again light in color. The lighter moths once more ruled as the darker moths became food for hungry birds.

An Example of Natural Selection but not Evolution

Assuming that this story of the peppered moths is true, it is a good example of natural selection, but is it evolution? Both creationists and evolutionists have tied the ideas of evolution and natural selection together as if one could not accept the second without also accepting the first.

It seems though that the concept of natural selection was first proposed by a creationist, one Edward Blyth who published this idea 24 years before Darwin’s publication.² Blyth saw natural selection as a process by which the created varieties adapted to changing environments. The truth is that even if a new variety of dark peppered moth developed from a lighter variety, it was still 100% a moth. No new “species” had evolved. At most, the peppered moth illustration represents a change within a kind or species, an idea that creationists have long accepted.

What Really Happened

Experiments in the 1950s by an Oxford University scientist, now deceased, by the name of Dr. Bernard Kettlewell were used to help arrive at the conclusions regarding the peppered moths. Today it appears that these experiments were to a large degree staged and are seen to be of little value any more. It had been thought that they were supported by solid evidence.

Dr. Michael Majerus, a moth expert at the University of Cambridge, says Kettlewell influenced his experiments by pinning or gluing dead moths on parts of trees where they could be easily spotted by birds. Many of the moths were bred by Kettlewell in his laboratory which may have made them less hardy and easier pickings for birds.

Beyond that, it is now conceded that the white variety of moths flourished again well before the reappearance of pollution-free trees at the same time that the black type was thriving in areas not affected by industry. Moreover, it is further conceded that moths usually don't rest on tree trunks during the day in the first place!

Worried Evolutionists

Some evolution scientists are worried about the effect of this revelation on public opinion. They fear that the new theories will be seized on by creationists as a springboard for questioning all evidence for Darwin's views. Therefore, they are now downplaying the significance of the story of the peppered moths after years of trumpeting its importance.

"The details of any experiments done 40 years ago are bound to be vulnerable to detailed criticism," says Richard Dawkins, a professor at Oxford University. "But, in any case, nothing momentous hangs on these experiments."

However, if experiments done 40 years ago can be questioned because of their antiquity, how about questioning a system of belief, Darwinism, that was first proposed 140 years ago?! *LSI*

1. Quote attributed to Professor Jerry Coyne, an evolutionist at the University of Chicago, as reported by Robert Matthews, *The Telegraph*, London.

2. See Morris, Henry M. and Gary E. Parker, *What is Creation Science?*, Master Books, 1982, page 82.