

# The Baird Facts: Bob, we hardly knew ye

By Esther C. Baird

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BEVERLY, MASS. - How do you tell the difference between a dead caterpillar and a dormant one? No, this isn't a joke. This is my frantic parental scrambling to handle the looming crisis surrounding Bob the Woolly Bear Caterpillar.

Bob made his way into my husband's sneaker last November: just a happy, woolly, little guy. But my husband needed his shoes, and it happened that my daughter had one of those plastic bug containers complete with an easy-lift lid, proper ventilation, and a built-in magnifier. So we adopted, and named, Bob.

Bob was the perfect pet for November and December. According to the surprisingly numerous internet sites on raising Woolly Bears, such a caterpillar would gradually become sluggish, then still through the winter. Come spring it would wake up, spin a cocoon, and emerge as an attractive Isabella Tiger Moth. Bob was right on schedule. He crawled around, ate the leaves we provided, and, in early January, he settled into his long winter nap signaling the promise of wonderful things to come.

Even the dormant phase was fascinating. In fact one morning, when my husband was the "mystery reader" at our daughter's preschool, he took Bob with him. My husband read "Bear Snores On," a story about a hibernating bear.

"And do you know what else sleeps through the winter?" he asked the class.

They wobbled and fidgeted in their chairs. My husband smiled and then, with a flourish, he pulled out Bob still snugly contained within his plastic home.

My husband walked Bob around the circle so that each child could have a close look; it felt like the perfect educational moment until . . . my husband tripped and lost his grip on Bob's house. The container popped open and Bob, his leaves, and his small cap of water flew across the floor.

"Not to worry," said my husband scooping everything up. "Bob's fine! Look he didn't even wake up."

Sure enough, he didn't.

Bob was fast asleep, not remotely bothered by hurtling across the floor under the watchful eyes of 12 preschoolers. So still, you might even wonder, was he perhaps too still. My husband and I looked at each other. Was he demonstrating the principle of hibernation to our daughter's impressionable, young class with a dead caterpillar? Surely not!

But Bob snored on — through all of January and February.

Now it's spring, (OK, it's the time of year when we really like to pretend that it's spring). And Bob is still dreaming. Though in a rather suspicious way — in a way that has caused many of his little woolly hairs to fall out.

So, for the third time since I've been writing this column, I consulted an etymologist.

I described Bob. I mean beside the hair loss, he looked to my untrained eye, like a sleeping caterpillar. When, I wondered, might we expect Bob to revive? Or was that hope a bit ambitious for a creature in Bob's particular ... state?

The etymologist, not one to mince words, e-mailed back. "Yep, he's expired. He's desiccated."

Desiccated: dried up like a banana chip, shriveled like beef jerky, preserved like the Pharaohs of Egypt for all time in our kitchen.

Something in our careful attention to his lifecycle had gone dreadfully wrong. I felt terrible. I quickly wrote the etymologist back asking where I could find an Isabella Tiger Moth so that I could reconstruct (OK, fake) the emergence of a beautiful winged insect for our daughter. But apparently the etymologist had reached his level of tolerance with the naïve, yet murderous, dealings of a suburban house mom. He never replied, leaving us with the rather obvious issue of what to do come spring.

And that's where things stand. There is no happy ending to this column, (besides the fact that I'm typing this at the new Starbucks on Elliot Street and any Starbucks with a drive-thru is a happy ending in my book).

At 3 1/2 death is a topic of curiosity for our eldest daughter. But I didn't want to make an object lesson out of our first pet insect. Not to mention, in our house we've been talking a lot about Easter and the meaning of resurrection — a potentially confusing concept when mixed with a caterpillar that can't even emerge from hibernation, let alone the grave.

So, if you see me darting around the bushes and parks in the next few weeks, don't be alarmed. I'm just trying to find a Tiger Moth, preferably one that responds to "Bob."

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