

Saltmarsh Caterpillar

The term “woollybear” is given to certain densely haired caterpillars that wander considerably between plants. Also, they are usually observed in late summer and early autumn, which is when they occur on hemp. Two species of woollybears may be found on the crop, the **yellow woollybear** (*Spilosoma virginica*) and the **saltmarsh caterpillar** (*Estigmene acrea*)

Saltmarsh caterpillar is an insect that occurs throughout much of the United States and is present throughout Colorado, except at the highest elevations. It is commonly encountered on a wide variety of plants, but serious damage on any crops are rare.

Caterpillars of saltmarsh caterpillar are densely hairy. Younger stages tend to be predominantly yellowish, but as they age they darken. However, there is wide variation on coloration from orange to nearly black. Indistinct striping may also be present. The adult moths are moderate size with a wing span of 3.5-4.5 cm. The forewings are white with black spotting. Female moths have yellow-orange hindwings and a generally orange abdomen. Males have white hind wings and an abdomen tipped with white.

The saltmarsh caterpillar survives winter as a full grown larva within a cocoon, hidden amongst leaves and other debris on the soil. Pupation occurs in spring and the adults emerge in late spring. After mating the female lays a series of bright yellow egg masses on leaves over the course of several weeks. Eggs hatch about 4-5 days after being laid.



Saltmarsh caterpillars that show some of the range of coloration of the species.



Adult saltmarsh caterpillar and two egg masses. Photograph courtesy of Bob Hammon.

Upon egg hatch the caterpillars originally feed as a group, producing skeletonizing injuries to leaves. As they get older, they individually disperse but continue to feed on leaves for another 3-5 weeks. Saltmarsh caterpillars will feed on the leaves of an extremely wide range of broadleaved plants, and on occasion occur in numbers that damage gardens and crops. The rather unusual name for the caterpillars is derived from their occurrence as a pest of gardens New England settlers that were located in salt marsh areas.

As they become full-grown, the caterpillars increasingly wander away from their host plant. Ultimately they move to a protected site where they spin a silken cocoon, which is mixed with the hairs of the caterpillar. Within

a few days after the cocoon is produced the caterpillar transforms to the pupal stage. Adults, sometimes known as “acrea moths”, emerge from the cocoons in about 2 weeks and produce a second generation in August and early September. Highest numbers of saltmarsh caterpillars will be found in hemp in late summer and early autumn, and late stage caterpillars often are observed wandering on the soil.

Damage to hemp by saltmarsh caterpillar is likely to be minimal. Peak feeding occurs late in the season and is limited to foliage. Furthermore the active habits of these insects, moving constantly from plant-to-plant, spreads feeding thinly throughout the crop rather than concentrating it on individual plants. These habits should result in leaf injuries that are insignificant to crop yield.

Lepidoptera: Noctuidae