

## Colorado Insect of Interest

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# Alfalfa Webworm

**Scientific Name:** *Loxostege cerialis* (Zeller)

**Order:** Lepidoptera (Butterflies, Moths, Skippers)

**Family:** Crambidae (crambid snout moths)

**Description and Distinctive Features:** The adult moth is the stage normally seen, often resting on lawns or low growing plants and visiting flowers. They are fairly small moths, with a wingspan of about an inch. The wings are generally mottled gray with black marking. A cream-colored band is present near the outer edge of the wing.

The caterpillars are rarely noticed but feed on leaves of various plants, resting within a loose silken shelter. Early stages are pale yellowish green, but later stages are dark and have a broad lighter band running the back of the caterpillar.

**Distribution in Colorado:** Statewide.

**Life History and Habits:** Alfalfa webworm likely has three generations a year. Winter is spent as a mature caterpillar, which pupates in spring. Adults of the first generation are normally present in May. Later generations produce adults seen in June-July and again in September.



**Figure 2.** Egg mass of alfalfa webworm. Photograph courtesy of John Capinera



**Figures 1a-b.** Adults of the alfalfa webworm

Adults lay eggs on leaves of various plants that are later eaten by the larvae (caterpillars). Despite the name, alfalfa is only one of many kinds of plants on which the caterpillars feed and plants in the Chenopodiaceae are preferred. Common plants on which the caterpillars may be seen include spinach, lambsquarters, Russian thistle, common mallow, beets and pigweed. The developing caterpillars produce a loose silken shelter on the leaves, often pulling the leaf into a curl or tying a few leaves together

Alfalfa webworm only very rarely produces significant damage to any crops. Alfalfa and sugarbeets are occasionally slightly damaged and it does appear in corn and sunflower. In home gardens



**Figure 3.** Late stage alfalfa webworm caterpillar. Photograph by Frank Peairs.



**Figure 4.** Alfalfa webworm on a spinach leaf.

#### **Alfalfa Webworm and “Lawn moths”.**

Alfalfa webworm moths are most often observed resting on turfgrass and are readily disturbed to fly when one walks across a lawn. In this habit it is one of several species that may be thought of as “lawn moths”. Usually the most commonly seen of these moths are **lucerne webworm** (*Nomophila nearctica*), which is about the same size as alfalfa webworm, and **forage looper** (*Caenurgina erechtea*), which is substantially larger. The caterpillars of both primarily feed on broadleaved plants, particularly clovers.



**Figure 6.** Lucerne webworm

caterpillars are most likely found on spinach.

Alfalfa webworm attracts most attention when the adult stages become extremely abundant and very visible. This happens infrequently but large numbers of moths were present over wide areas of northeastern Colorado 1986 and again in 2020.

**Related Species:** The **beet webworm**, *Loxostege sticticalis*, is also common in much of the state and has a generally similar appearance. Adults lack the dark dashed markings that are present on the forewings of the alfalfa webworm. Beet webworm larvae similarly feed within a silken shelter, but the caterpillars differ from alfalfa webworm being greener with dark spot. Beet webworm caterpillars feed on a wide variety of plants including on a wide variety of plants including beets, chard, lambsquarters, pigweed, Russian thistle and hemp.



**Figure 5.** Beet webworm caterpillar feeding on hemp.



**Figure 7.** Forage looper

**Sod webworms** are a group of moths that do have caterpillars that feed on grasses and are present in lawns. At least five species may be found in Colorado lawns but significant damage is rare. Adults of most tend to be buff-colored and hold their wings when resting so that they are more rolled than spread out. Sod webworm moths usually spend the day hidden in the thatch area or on vegetation at the edges of lawns. They emerge at dusk and fly low over the lawn area, dropping eggs in flight. Rarely are sod webworms noted, except when adults become extremely abundant. This happened in August/September 2016 over a broad area of northeastern Colorado when adults of the **vagabond crambus** (*Agriphila vulgivagellus*) was present in large numbers for several weeks. No reports of earlier damage by the larvae were received.

#### **References.**

BugGuide [Species \*Loxostege cereralis\* - Alfalfa Webworm - Hodges#5017](#)

Capinera, J.L. 2020. *Handbook of Vegetable Pests, Second Edition*. Academic Press. 799 pp.



**Figure 8.** Vagabond crambus, one of the sod webworm moths.