American Dagger Moth

Scientific Name: *Acronicta americana* (Harris)

Order: Lepidoptera (Butterflies, Moths, Skippers)
Family: Noctuidae (Cutworms, Armyworms and Relatives)

Figure 1. Caterpillar of the American dagger moth. Photograph by Frank Peairs.

Identification and Descriptive Features: The larvae (Figure 1) have a greenish body but are covered in long yellow hairs, giving them a "woolly bear" look. Two pairs of thin tufts of black hairs protrude from the front of the body. The moth is a moderately large "cutworm" type of moth with grayish-brown wings with black markings (Figure 2.

Distribution in Colorado: Probably generally distributed in areas of the state where boxelder maple grows. It is also present in urban areas where silver maple is a common host plant.

Life History and Habits: Winter is spent as a pupa, within a cocoon in sheltered areas in the vicinity of previously infested trees. Adult moths emerge and lay eggs during late spring on the young leaves of maples (*Acer* spp.).

The larvae feed on leaves throughout summer, usually becoming full-grown in September. When they have finished with a leaf they have a characteristic habit of then clipping the petiole so that the leaf drops (Figure 3). This habit apparently is done to avoid detection by birds that locate prey near leaves that show feeding injuries.

 In early fall the full-grown caterpillarrs crawl down the tree trunk in search of pupation sites and may be encountered dozens of yards from the host tree at this time. Finding a suitable sheltered spot they spin a dense silken cocoon and pupate within it. There is one generation produced per year.

Figure 2. Adults of the American dagger moth.

Figure 3. Leaves (on left) characteristically cut at the petiole after feeding by American dagger moth caterpillars. Photograph by David Leatherman.

Related Species: The poplar dagger moth (*A. leporina* Linnaeus) also is present in Colorado. Larvae feed on poplar, willow and birch. Habits and appearance of the caterpillars are generally similar.