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Invasives: Winter Cutworm



Have you ever been surprised by caterpillar-type worms crawling in the snow on a mild winter day? What you are seeing is most likely Winter Cutworm (*noctua pronuba*).

Noctua pronuba caterpillars are sometimes called snow cutworms. They are closely related to other cutworm species found in agricultural fields, feeding at the base of plants and sometimes moving up onto foliage. In large numbers, caterpillars move across fields and roads, similar to armyworm. One of the key traits of winter cutworm is

its incredible cold tolerance. Caterpillars continue to feed in the middle of winter on sunny days. The cutworms can destroy large amounts of vegetation and they can also make your pets sick if they eat them.

The adult of this species is known as the yellow underwing. It is native to Europe. This bug was first discovered in North America in Nova Scotia in the late 1970's. It is now reported to occur from coast to coast in southern Canada and the temperate United States. Its food plants include a wide variety of crops and vegetables: strawberry, tomato, potato, carrot, cabbage, beet, lettuce, grape and also grasses. Although larvae feed on many other cultivated and wild plant species, no economic damage had ever been attributed to this insect in North America before the outbreak in Michigan's northern Lower Peninsula in the fall of 2007 when MSU extension agents reported thousands of caterpillars around homes and in hay fields. There has not been an outbreak of that scope since.

Will this happen again this year? Not likely, since there were no reports of winter cutworm last fall. There may be the occasional worm, but there is no data to indicate that there should be concern. However it is always wise to be informed and watchful.

If you would like to know more about winter cutworms check out these websites:

MSU Field Crops Entomology Program—concise, with plenty of pictures for easy identification
http://www.msue.msu.edu/objects/content_revision/download.cfm/item_id.434424/workspace_id.-30/Winter%20Cut%20Worm.pdf

Diagnostic Services at MSU

<http://www.pestid.msu.edu/InsectsArthropods/NoctuaPronuba/tabid/73/Default.aspx>

Ontario Ministry of Agriculture

<http://www.omafra.gov.on.ca/english/crops/field/news/croptalk/2008/ct-1108a7.htm>