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-  EMAIL STORY
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Moths Abundant Around Iowa



Army cutworm, or miller moths, have been numerous around homes this week. Photo by Ralph Anderson, Buffalo County Extension, Nebraska

By Laura Jesse, Plant and Insect Diagnostic Clinic and Erin Hodgson and Donald Lewis, Department of Entomology

This has been the week of the fuzzy brown moths or FBMs (as entomologists not-so-technically call the hundreds of moth species that fit this description). There is a wide variety of species that can be called FBMs and it seems we are experiencing several.

Some crop pests fall into the FBM category, and the sight of so many moths can cause concern. So far no serious crop pests have been among the specimens submitted to the clinic for diagnosis. We already are [monitoring for black cutworms](#) and have recommended when to scout for caterpillars in corn. In addition to concerns about crop damage there are questions about using insecticides to keep FBMs away from homes as they are bothersome. We do not recommend treating these nuisance moths for several reasons:

1. Adult moths can be a nuisance, but do not cause plant damage. If they eat, they only feed on pollen and nectar.
2. Spraying foliar insecticides is not a cost-effective option for these night-flying moths. Field applications are particularly not effective because the adults are not feeding on young corn.
3. Moth species that do not eat as adults will die in less than a week anyway so we expect this to be a short term annoyance.
4. Reducing outdoor lighting near homes at night is the best way to keep the masses away from homes. They are attracted to windows as well, but as long as screens are in good repair they will not get indoors.
5. There appears to be a variety of species active right now so we are uncertain where they will lay eggs and if the caterpillars will become a pest. At this point we just have to wait and see.

Pictures and reports submitted so far have been determined to be army cutworm moths and lucerne moths. Lucerne moth caterpillars feed on a wide variety of plants and grasses including alfalfa. They are not considered pests in Iowa.

Army cutworm moths are also commonly called "miller moths." (Fig 1) The adult moths are migratory and well known for gathering around homes and accidentally getting inside. Normally the army cutworm moth migration is more noticeable in states to our west (Kansas, Nebraska, Colorado) but it seems that this year Iowans are experiencing more moths than normal and they are early this year. Army cutworm moths are annoying, but harmless.

We do not expect an increase in damaging caterpillars because moths are abundant. Army cutworms and lucerne moths have such a broad host-range they often end up feeding on weedy plants in ditches and other areas. We will have to wait and see if there is any more caterpillar activity than normal, but there is no need for preemptive treatments.



Figure 1. Army cutworm moths can be variable in size and color. Photo by Whitney Cranshaw, www.ipmimages.org

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