

Colorado Insect of Interest

Black Witch

Scientific Name: *Ascalapha odorata* (Linnaeus)

Order: Lepidoptera (Butterflies, Moths, and Skippers)

Family: Erebidae (Erebid moths)

Identification and Descriptive Features: The black witch is the largest moth found in North America with a wingspan (11-16 cm) that can exceed 6 inches. General coloration is mottled brown and they may initially be mistaken for a bat as they rest under eaves or other protected sites during the day. Wing patternings include iridescent purple and pink. A pale pinkish band crosses the wings of female moths, who are more heavily bodied. Males tend to be overall darker and have a somewhat larger wingspan than females, but a smaller body.

Distribution in Colorado: Potentially statewide. (There is a report of it from Leadville following a 4th of July snowstorm.) The black witch is a subtropical/tropical species that does not reproduce in Colorado. Its occurrence in the state follows favorable wind patterns that bring the moths on migrations originating from the Gulf States, Mexico or Central America.

Life History and Habits: The black witch moth occurs over a broad area of both North and South America, ranging south into Brazil. Its occurrence in the United States typically results from migrations originating in Mexico and Central America, although year-round breeding populations exist in Florida.

In warmer climates the black witch reproduces year-round. The larvae are large, grayish caterpillars with banding and feed at night on the leaves of various leguminous trees and shrubs, primarily in the genera *Acaccia*, *Prosopsis* and *Cassia*. Kentucky coffeetree (*Gymnocladus dioica*) and locust (*Robinia*) are also reported larval hosts.

Breeding areas move somewhat northward during the summer with most moths that reach Colorado probably originating from northern Mexico. Migrations northward typically occur with the onset of the rainy season in Mexico, from early June through October. The moths are strong fliers and, carried on favorable winds, can cross the Gulf of Mexico and are known to



Figure 1. Black witch, male. Photograph courtesy of Timothy Haley, USDA-FS and Bugwood/IPM Images.



Figure 1. Black witch, female. This individual is bit lighter than is typical.

have occasionally reached Hawaii and Alaska. Moths fly at night and seek shaded areas for daytime shelter.

There are some legends/myths associated with the black witch, due largely to its large size and dark coloration. In Mexico it is sometimes known as the “butterfly of death” (“mariposa de la muerte”), a legend reportedly dating to the Aztec era associating the moth with bad luck. It was also featured in the novel *Silence of the Lambs*, the pupae being placed in the throat of a victim. (The death’s head sphinx moth was substituted in the movie version.)

Related Species: The white witch, *Thysania agrippina*, is the moth with the largest wing span of any moth or butterfly, ranging up to 280 mm (ca. 11 inches). The white witch is native to South America and is not a migratory species that ranges into the United States.



Figure 1. Black witch, female. This individual was resting on a telephone pole in Fort Collins (7/13/2010) that was heavily shaded.