

## Colorado Insect of Interest

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# Saltmarsh Caterpillar/Acrea Moth

**Scientific Name:** *Estigmene acrea* (Drury)

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

**Family:** Arctiidae/or Arctiinae of the Noctuidae (Woollybears and Tiger Moths)



**Figure 1.** Saltmarsh caterpillar crossing highway



**Figure 2.** Adults of the saltmarsh caterpillar, “acrea moths”. Males on top row, females on bottom row..

### Identification and Descriptive Features:

The caterpillars are densely hairy. Younger stages tend to be predominantly yellowish, but as they age they darken. However, there is wide variation on coloration from orange to nearly black. Indistinct striping may also be present.

The adult moths are moderate size with a wing span of 3.5-4.5 cm. The forewings are white with black spotting. Female moths have yellow-orange hindwings and a

generally orange abdomen. Males have white hind wings and an abdomen tipped with white.

**Distribution in Colorado:** Statewide except at the highest elevations. Often locally common in many areas of both western and eastern Colorado.

**Life History and Habits:** The saltmarsh caterpillar survives winter as a full grown larva within a cocoon, hidden amongst leaves and other debris on the soil. Pupation occurs in spring and the adults emerge in late spring. After mating the female lays a series of bright yellow egg masses on leaves over the course of several weeks. Eggs hatch about 4-5 days after being laid.



**Figure 3.** Acrea moth with egg mass.

Upon egg hatch the caterpillars originally feed as a group, producing skeletonizing injuries to leaves. As they get older, they individually disperse



**Figures 4, 5.** A young saltmarsh caterpillar (top); older saltmarsh caterpillar (bottom) showing striping patterns.

but continue to feed on leaves for another 3-5 weeks. Saltmarsh caterpillars will feed on the leaves of an extremely wide range of broadleaved plants, and on occasion occur in numbers that damage gardens and crops. The rather unusual name for the caterpillars is derived from their occurrence as a pest of gardens New England settlers that were located in salt marsh areas.

As they become full-grown, the caterpillars increasingly wander away from their host plant. Ultimately they move to a protected site where they spin a silken cocoon, which is mixed with the hairs of the caterpillar. Within a few days after the cocoon is produced the caterpillar transforms to the pupal stage. Adults, sometimes known as “acrea moths”, emerge from the cocoons in about 2 weeks and produce a second generation in August and early September. Populations of saltmarsh caterpillars are highest late in the season and sometimes large numbers may be seen migrating across roads as weed hosts dry out and they search for new food.

**Related Species:** The term "woollybear" is generally applied to any caterpillars in the family Arctiidae that are densely covered with hairs. Within the state there are at least two additional species commonly considered woollybears: the **yellow woollybear**, *Spilosoma virginica* (Fabricius), and the **banded woollybear**, *Pyrrharctia isabella* (J.E. Smith). Life history of these is generally similar to that of the saltmarsh caterpillar, although the banded woollybear survives winter as a full-grown larvae and again feeds for a brief time in spring before pupating.

Moths of many members of the Arctiidae family are commonly known as tiger moths, as many have banding or other wing patterning. For example, adults of the banded woollybear are sometimes known as the "Isabella tiger moth" and the adults of the yellow woollybear may be called the "Virginia tiger moth".



**Figure 6.** Banded woollybear.



**Figure 7.** Yellow woollybear.