

Uncommon Invertebrates

Saddleback Moth Caterpillars, by Amy Weber

Last summer, as I was finishing some evening weeding in my irises, I discovered this guy, munching away on an iris blade right by my elbow! I admit that I startled a bit, since I'd never seen one before, but was really more interested in what it was. As any Master Gardener would do, I took some photos and headed inside for a little research. I searched for images of "spiny brown caterpillar with a green back". With its distinct markings, it did not take too long to match it to photos of the **Saddleback Caterpillar (*Acharia stimulea*)**.

After a little research, I was thankful that I had not touched it. It has a painful sting, that can cause quite a reaction. Unlike bees, wasp, and hornets that have a stinger, the Saddleback Caterpillar has stinging or *urticating* hairs. These quill-like hairs and the connected poison sacs are used as a defense mechanism. "When the hairs are touched, they pierce the skin releasing poison. Reactions can range from a mild itching to the more severe pain, swelling, blistering, dermatitis, and even intestinal disturbances." (Entomology.ca.uky.edu)



The pain from the sting is immediate and spreads to a nearby lymph node. Some pain, swelling, and redness can last for a week or more. Be AWARE and avoid touching the Saddleback, but if stung, wash the area immediately and remove the loose hairs. Duct tape is helpful when removing the more imbedded hairs. As with any sting, some people are highly allergic and may require medical attention.

The Saddleback is much less harmful to plants than to people since the plants will easily recover from the chewed leaves. They are not picky eaters, hosting on more than 40 plant families and many species within each family, including apple, asters, blueberries, citrus, corn, dogwoods, maples, oaks, and viburnums. Evidently, they like things in the Iridaceae family!

Other interesting Saddleback Facts:

- They are native to the Southeastern United States
- ***Acharia stimulea*** is a limacodid moth, or slug moth (Limacodidae family, part of the Lepidoptera order) They are called slug caterpillars because their short abdominal legs lack tiny hooks that most other caterpillars have.
- The brown caterpillar's green center section is bordered with white markings that outline a saddle-like shape, hence the name. Its bright color pattern is **aposematic**, indicating toxicity or distastefulness.
- The larvae stage takes several months to feed and develop before spinning a tight silk cocoon to overwinter. The fuzzy, dark brown moth emerges the next spring, laying 30 – 50 eggs on the upper surface of leaves of its numerous host plants, where the eggs hatch and the process begins again.



Caterpillar Photo by Amy Weber

Adult Moth Photo by [Lyle J. Buss](#), University of Florida.

References:

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