

Snowbush Caterpillar - Spanworm White-tipped Black Moth (*Melanchroia chephise*)

At first, the caller thought I had mentioned a new computer virus, but no, this is the snowbush spanworm, not “spam worm”! Depending on your point of view, your snowbush shrubs (*Breyntia nivosa*) may be getting a free pruning! The snowbush caterpillar is more abundant this year than in previous years and is stripping the foliage from these attractive shrubs. Caterpillar populations may increase if parasite or the predator activity has declined (due to too much rain?) or it just may be the normal predator-prey fluctuations. Usually snowbush hedges will re-sprout in a short time, but to make matters worse, some properties may have so many caterpillars that after the foliage is eaten, the spanworms start chewing on the twigs and bark. Adrian Hunsberger of Miami-Dade Co. reports that three foot tall snowbush have been killed by this type of feeding. In mid-July 2005, caterpillars had defoliated shrubs in Naples and had chewed the bark off of plants so severely that it resembled rabbit feeding!



A healthy, unchewed snowbush!

Description and Biology: The yellow and black larva (caterpillar) is the immature stage of a pretty moth called the white-tipped black. This feeding machine’s metered, looping crawling style gives it away as a member of the “inchworm” family of moths, also known as “spanworms”. Inchworms have fewer abdominal legs than many other caterpillars, hence they stretch out the length of their bodies and pull their rear section up quickly, which forms a loop; much like a slinky toy going down steps.



Hungry larvae have chewed the bark off of these plants.



Late instar larva producing frass.

At about an inch long, the larva is full-grown and ready to change into a pupa. According to lepidopterist, Mike Malloy, it enters the ground and goes through the changes there, and emerges as a moth in about seven days. Pupae were also found in loose silken webbing tying leaves together in the canopy. This is a day flying moth, which is unusual, as the usual *modus operandi* for most moths is to be covert, night time navigators. The moths have a wing span that is a little over one inch and a striking velvety appearance, with navy-blue, black wings and with white margined tips on each of the four wings plus an orange thorax. On June 21, Mike and I examined some snowbush hedges in the Kings Lake area.



Egg

Adult

Some of these hedges were fifty percent defoliated. The hedges had mature caterpillars as well as newly hatched larvae, under one-eighth inch in length. This tells us that a new generation will be appearing with more damage on the way. It's not certain how many generations there are, but we will be keeping close track this year. The salmon-pink eggs(see inset picture) are about 0.7 mm long and are placed individually on the stems in the area behind the stipules.

Hosts: The snowbush spanworm also attacks Otaheite gooseberry (*Phyllanthus acidus*), and supposedly white sapote (*Casimiroa edulis*), and snow-on-the-mountain (*Euphorbia marginata*).

What to do: If you don't enjoy the colorful, slinky inchworms & pretty moths, a spray solution with a spinosad containing insecticide product would be a narrow spectrum insecticide choice similar to B.t. A labeled horticultural pesticidal soap spray may eliminate the smaller larvae.

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