
SUNNYSIDE THYMES

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Guess Who's Coming to Dinner?

SMG Education Committee

The Milkweed Tussock Moth

I am very much a novice at identifying insects and butterflies, and I generally intend to ignore them. However, even I finally got the message that I should be planting flowers to attract butterflies and other pollinators so I planted a couple of milkweed plants last summer in one of the few sunny spots in my garden. Before the milkweed matured enough to bloom, I noticed the leaves were being eaten. Being the novice that I am, I first assumed I had attracted a monarch butterfly, even though I had never observed one in the garden. Closer inspection revealed that the leaves were being eaten by a cluster of small, furry, black and orange striped caterpillars that even my inexperienced eye knew couldn't be monarch caterpillars.

A google search revealed that I had attracted the Milkweed Tussock Moth, *Euchaetes egle*.

What I was seeing was actually the end stage caterpillar. The Milkweed Tussock Moth lays her eggs on the underside of the leaves of the milkweed. Freshly hatched larvae are a drab white with black heads. Eventually the distinctive black tufts with a few white ones at each end emerge. The larvae are voracious eaters. They eat only the soft tissue areas of the milkweed plant, leaving only the stem and large veins. Within a day, my milkweed plants looked like a child's drawing of a stick figure. Like the monarch caterpillar, the tussock moth takes in chemicals called cardiac glycosides from the milkweed that makes it unattractive to predators.



The adult moth has rather drab brown-grey wings with a yellow-black striped body. Its habitat ranges from the Atlantic Ocean to the mid-plains in the United States, and the caterpillars may be observed from May through September. This caterpillar is not a welcome garden visitor. Without resorting to chemicals, the best control is to remove the milkweed leaves being eaten immediately and destroy them or move them far enough away that the caterpillars aren't likely to crawl back to the host plant.

