

Hag Moth Caterpillar

Lepidoptera: Limacodidae: *Phobetron pithecium* (Smith)

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[Jerry A. Payne, USDA-ARS, Bugwood.org]

Description The bizarre appearance of the hag moth caterpillars makes them easy to recognize. They have nine pairs of fleshy appendages on their sides, some of which are long and twisted. These appendages look somewhat like legs but are not used for movement. The caterpillar is densely covered with short, brown hair. Some of these hairs are hollow and are connected to toxin glands in the skin. Contact with these spines produces a burning, itching sensation along with redness and inflammation similar to a bee sting. Caterpillars measure about 1 inch (2.5 cm) when full grown.

Common Host Plants Rose, sassafras, alder, dogwoods, hickories, and spirea are preferred.

Damage A person "stung" by a poisonous caterpillar should immediately wash the affected area to remove any insect hairs and poison that remain. An ice pack will help reduce swelling, and creams and lotions containing steroids will lessen the discomfort and promote healing. People known to be sensitive to insect stings should consult a physician. Stinging caterpillars rarely occur in sufficient numbers to be considered plant pests, but people who work with ornamental plants should learn to recognize them and avoid touching them.

Habitat/Distribution The hag moth caterpillar is a general feeder and is commonly found on shade trees and ornamental shrubs. They are usually seen in late summer.

Control Stinging caterpillars rarely occur in sufficient numbers to be considered plant pests, but people who work with ornamental plants should learn to recognize them and avoid touching them.

Life Cycle The hag moth has a complete life cycle with egg, larval, pupal, and adult stages. There may be more than one generation a year in the southern USA.

Interesting Facts Another common name for the hag moth caterpillar is monkey slug.