

In My Backyard Lightening Bug... or Miller?



Photo: Patrick Porter

The house in which I spent a good part of my childhood in Marathon was located on the west side of town, just off the highway and facing the Glass Mountains and the venerable sentinel of the Marathon Basin, Iron Mountain. There were no other buildings to the north of us, leaving a clear view of gorgeous mountain scenery that changed, moment from moment, as the sunlight and clouds played hide-and-seek. That location also left us open to whatever drifted in from the broad plain that stretched from town to the foothills; animal, mineral (dust storms,) vegetable (tumbleweeds,) thunderstorms, blizzards and howling Blue Northers.

One year we looked out and a squadron of thousands of dragonflies were migrating from the north to the south...maybe millions. The air was filled with fluttering red wings and bulbous eyes, but, I am saving that story for another time.

Another year we were invaded by porcupines in our poplar trees, another story to be told later. We were always being visited by rattlesnakes, red racers, coachwhips, hognose snakes and a variety of lizards and horn toads, sometimes in alarming numbers. In wet years, we were inundated by



croaking toads, which dug themselves out of the saturated earth and serenaded us through the night for a few days, if they weren't caught by the snakes...another story. Life for me was an unending parade of wildlife...it's no wonder I majored in biology when I got to college.

But, perhaps the nastiest thing that ever visited our little Poulter pre-fab casita was the year the Millers, or what we called, Lightening Bugs, filled our house and yard, our cars and trucks, especially congregating where the ceiling and wall met, driving my mother almost insane trying to clean up the mess. Their soft little wings fluttered against the wall, depositing "feathers" (tiny scales that coat their wings) up into the corners and leaving a gray ring around the ceiling. It went on for a couple of weeks. We would open closet doors and a cloud of Lightening Bugs would fly out. We would find them in our food, in our clothes and anywhere else they could squeeze in for the day. At night, clouds of them fogged the porch lights, ceiling lights, table lamps and any other light that was switched on. During the day, we would find their dead carcasses in drifts under the lights and on our furniture and the floor.

Then, just as suddenly as it began, the Lightening Bugs were gone, with only a few stragglers left through the remainder of the summer. We never saw them that bad again. How could such a tiny, innocuous little creature be so obnoxious and cause so much turmoil? And, why did it happen in that particular year? Such questions are hard to answer. Looking at the creature itself might give us some enlightenment.

Lightening Bugs, or, Miller Moths, are very common near the Rocky Mountain states. Those states border the breadbasket of the United States where wheat and grain crops are grown. The Glass Mountains at Marathon, along with the Del Nortes, Mt. Ord, Santiago Peak and other ranges

just west of town and to the south, are where the Rockies pass through Texas. Although we are not a wheat growing area, there is enough vegetation to support their populations, and in the right years, there is an explosion in numbers.

The Miller is the adult form of the Army Cutworm, which feeds on alfalfa, wheat and other types of vegetation, including different grasses. The adult females lay eggs in those areas during the late summer and early fall and the larvae hatch in a few weeks and begin to feed. It likes plants with broad leaves, but it will feed on any kind of grass as well. The larvae winter over, feeding when temperatures warm up. They can cause damage to crops, gardens and lawns. If the conditions are good and the population of cutworms explodes, they may move in mobs and crawl across fields and cover roads.

By the middle of the spring the cutworms are done feeding and dig into the soil to pupate, usually from March to May. Three to six weeks later they emerge as full-grown adults and immediately begin to migrate to higher altitudes to feed on plant nectar. During the summer their reproductive system goes on hiatus and mating, egg production and egg laying are put on hold until summer is over.

In late summer or early fall, they begin a migration back to lower altitudes where they mate, lay eggs and die. It is the migration, both spring and summer, that causes the problems, especially in good years when populations expand due to abundant food supplies. The moth migration usually begins about the middle of May or early June in most areas and goes on for five or six weeks. The obnoxious period for humans lasts only about two or three weeks during that period. And, the migrations depend on weather and temperature conditions.

Millers shun light and usually are not seen during the day. During the day, they seek dark areas to hide, including cracks and crevasses in walls, doorways, garages and cars, very often clustering in large groups. At night, they emerge to resume their migration, but are strongly attracted to porch and house lights. And therein lies the problem.

The fall migration is usually shorter due to the death of many adults during the summer, making the swarms much smaller. Following the migration, the presence of cutworms increases and the environment is swamped with worms and their damage.

The population of cutworms is governed by weather and conditions. Very wet weather or extremely cold weather will kill off populations. An increase in predators, mainly ground beetles and parasitic wasps, can control the population. Plowing fields and tilling gardens will also kill the cutworms. The presence of flowering plants and higher humidity has a beneficial effect on the worms...fewer plants and droughty, dry conditions hinder their populations.

Although the Millers pose no health problem or damage to clothing or furniture, they are a considerable nuisance. The fat stored in their bodies turns rancid after they die and can produce an objectionable odor. Their carcasses can also attract household scavengers such as carpet beetles and other insects, which can be a problem in themselves. They also cause

spotting on carpets, drapes and upholstery and unfinished woodwork due to an acidic secretion that exudes from the bodies. And, of course, there is the "ring-around-the-ceiling" effect that we suffered in our home.



Army Cutworm pupa: W. Cranshaw

Besides predatory beetles, the Miller's biggest predators in the environment are bats and birds. Other animals feed on them as well, including grizzly bears, who find their fat stores to be especially nourishing.

Other than re-landscaping your property to reduce food sources and spraying toxic chemicals which can negatively affect other beneficial insects while having no effect on Millers, the best way to combat them in your home is to swat them or suck them up in a vacuum cleaner. Hanging a light bulb over a bucket of water doped with a small amount of detergent also works as a good trap and is non-toxic around pets and children. Of course, one should be careful with electricity near water, but it can be done. Changing lights to yellow bulbs also seems to keep them from swarming porch lights. Electric bug-zappers are also effective against Millers.

The world is full of moths and not all of them are Millers. Other common moths found in your home are Indian Meal Moths (smaller than Millers, yellow brown with dark tip on the wing) and clothing moths (pale brown and very small.) The Miller's scientific name is *Euxoa auxiliaris* and they have a wingspan from 1 1/2" to 2". They usually are gray or light brown with streaky or wavy dark and light markings on the wing. Although the markings and coloration may vary from one adult to another, they all sport a kidney-shaped mark on the forewing. We certainly have many moth types in our environment, but the Miller is distinctive and at times quite a nuisance.

And by the way, we called them Lightning Bugs in Marathon because when you drove down the highway at night they would fly into the beam of the headlight and their large, reflective eyes would flash "on" and "off." Now you know.

And, what's in your backyard?