

Bug of the Month

by Jim Revell / September 2016

Ailanthus (Tree of Heaven) Webworm Moth

AILANTHUS (Tree of Heaven) Webworm Moth

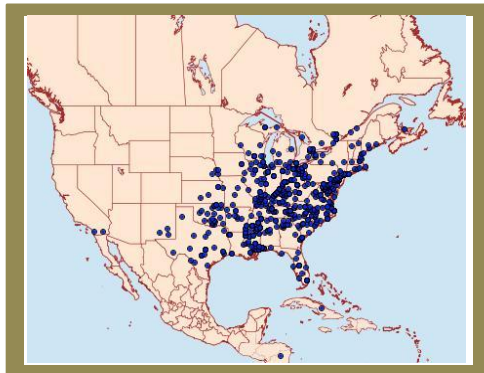
Class: Insecta (Insects)
Order: Lepidoptera (Butterflies & Moths)
Family: Attevidae (Tropical Ermine Moths)
Genus: *Atteva*
Species: *aurea** | *pustulella**

**Atteva aurea* is proper name for the NA Temperate Forest Moths. *Atteva pustulella* is now restricted to the tropical rainforest species



MG Phyllis Turner discovered a host of these moths devouring nectar from her Rudbeckia flowers (see Phyllis' great pix above right). The adult moth has a wingspan of 18-30mm (3/4"-1 1/8"). Their forewing is orange with several large black and white rosettes. This pattern varies and leads to many different names. Their hind wings are smoke-gray. When at rest, adults appear long and slender, almost beetle-like.

They range from the Great Lakes states to Nebraska and Texas and, in the east, to New York and south to Florida (see msstate.edu map below).



They are active during the day in open habitats where the adults feed on nectar of flowers from Spring (April) through the Fall (November). Their larvae (caterpillars) have a reddish brown head with a pale brown body and grayish back stripe flanked by brown stripes (Larvae above defoliate a sapling at the UVA Blandy Experimental Farm). Larvae live in communal webs and, depending on the region, have several generations. The life cycle can be completed in four weeks.

The main food source for larvae became the *Ailanthus Altissima* (Tree of Heaven), a native tree of Asia and introduced in North America intentionally, planted as an ornamental in urban areas. This tree is now found in 44 out of 50 states, as well as southern Canada and, as we all know, is an invasive species; however, the moth is native to North America and has increased its range due to the introduction of the *Ailanthus Altissima*. The moth's northern range was initially limited by its original host plant, the Paradise tree, but, thanks to the *Ailanthus* (in the same family), the moth followed the new host up the eastern states to Canada. This is one moth we might want to route for!!

Photo References: MG Phyllis Turner; blandy.virginia.edu/arboretum/recent-features/ailanthus-webworm/;
map: mothphotographersgroup.msstate.edu/species.php?hodges=2401

Research References / Resources: blandy.virginia.edu/arboretum/recent-features/ailanthus-webworm/;
<http://bugguide.net/node/view/430?printable=1>; Field Guide to Insects and Spiders of NA by Arthur V. Evans

Jim Revell is a Bedford Extension Master Gardener Volunteer.

Read more of his articles on the "Jims Bugs" page @ www.BedfordMasterGardeners.org