



A SEVERE URBAN INSECT PEST IN THE TREASURE VALLEY

Dr. Armando Falcon-Brindis

Research Faculty and Extension Specialist of Entomology
University of Idaho
Parma Research and Extension Center
afalconbrindis@uidaho.edu

The problem

On August 17, 2026, McKellip Sod Farm called, requesting help to identify an insect problem: a type of caterpillar damaging turf grasses across multiple properties in the valley about which they had received reports. The sod farm owner, Bob McKellip, indicated he has never seen these in turfgrass during his 30 years in business, but has seen them in other row crops. After inspecting several properties around Star and Eagle, we found them on both existing turfgrass and new sod. We visited one of their customers and I collected 721 pupae, but I estimate a density of armyworm larvae in that property (~2000 sq ft) between 10-15 larvae per square foot. This homeowner had to replace their entire yard, costing thousands of dollars. While most reports seem to be in the eastern portion of the valley (Figure 1), the issue might be across the entire valley. McKellip Sod Farm also asked if I could inspect their fields with them to determine if the caterpillars were present; we found no caterpillars or evidence of them on their farm.



Figure 1. Area with reports of the presence of the true armyworm in the Valley, as of August 24, 2026.

This pest presents two issues. 1) The larvae actively feed on turf grasses (different mixes of Kentucky bluegrass, rye and tall fescue) to the point where the turf grasses might not recover. 2) Once the larvae are ready to pupate, they crawl around looking for suitable places to do so, and basically people see massive numbers of caterpillars entering their patios, garages, and houses (Figure 2).



Figure 2. Damaged turfgrass in Eagle, Idaho (left), and true armyworm caterpillars aggregated trying to find spaces to pupate.

Which pest are we dealing with?

The pest is commonly known as the true armyworm, white-speck moth, common armyworm, or rice armyworm, which is a species of moth in the family Noctuidae. The scientific name is *Mythimna unipuncta* Haworth 1809, and it occurs across North America all the way down to South America, and even in Europe, Africa, and Asia. It is known to be an agricultural pest, and caterpillars move as a massive group (army) from place to place.

The larvae of true armyworm feed on a variety of grasses as well as other crops. In 2024, Dr. Armando Falcon (U of I) documented a massive outbreak of true armyworms attacking newly established teff grass and crabgrass in Kentucky ([click here for more information](#)).

Caterpillars can be identified by the light brown or yellowish-tan color of the head. It is covered in a highly distinct, dark-brown, net-like or honeycomb pattern. Two dark arcs face each other right over the front of the face, forming a clear "V" or inverted "Y" shape (Figure 3 - left). A wide, dark greenish-black stripe runs down the center of the back of the body (Figure 3 - center). They curl up tightly into a "C" shape when disturbed or dropped (Figure 3 - right).



Figure 3. Larvae of true armyworm.

The adults can be identified by the tan or reddish-brown forewing having a single, distinct white dot right in the center, which gives the insect its specific scientific name, *unipuncta* (Figure 4).

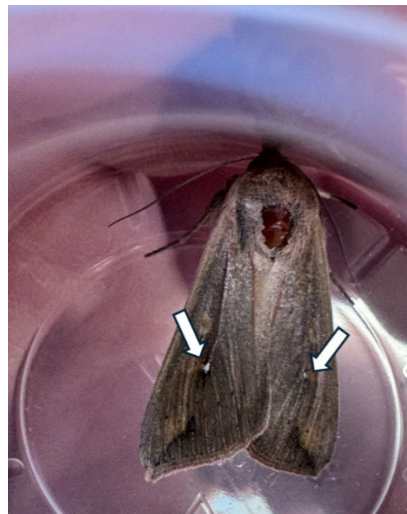


Figure 4. Adult true armyworm.

Once the developed caterpillars are ready to pupate, they look for suitable places, typically within **two to four inches** in the soil (Figure 5). Under optimal summer temperatures, the entire lifecycle finishes in about **28 to 41 days**, allowing multiple generations to overlap during a single growing season.



Figure 5. Pupa of true armyworm in the soil. Dr. Armando Falcon (U of I) collecting pupae of armyworms under the sod in Eagle, ID.

What do we do next?

Because a heavy outbreak can defoliate large swaths of grass overnight, immediate and targeted intervention is required to save the turf's crown from permanent damage. There are multiple over-the-counter products available to control this pest during its larval stage. Some examples include active ingredients such as **Zeta-Cypermethrin** or **Bifenthrin**, but don't forget there are biological-based chemistries that would work (**Spinosad** or **Bacillus thuringiensis - Bt**).

Before applying any treatment, establish the scope and maturity of the population:

1. Perform a Soap Flush Test: Mix 2 tablespoons of liquid dish soap into a gallon of water and pour it over a 2x2 square foot area at the margin of a damaged brown patch. True armyworms hide deep within the thatch during the day; the soap solution irritates them, forcing them to surface within 60 seconds.
2. Determine the Economic Threshold: If you count more than 3 to 4 caterpillars per square foot, the turf cannot self-recover, and chemical intervention is economically and structurally warranted.
3. Evaluate Larval Size: True armyworms pass through 6 developmental stages (instars). If the caterpillars are under 0.5 inches long, low-impact biological treatments will work. If they are over 0.75 inches long, they are in their final instar—where they cause 80% of their total lifelong foliage destruction—meaning fast-acting synthetic chemicals must be deployed to prevent immediate defoliation.

What SHOULD WE NOT do?

1. Do not just assume you have an insect pest problem and spray your turfgrass without confirming first. Attacks from the true armyworms look like water stress or nutrient deficiency. Call an entomologist if you find a bug and don't know what pest you are dealing with.
2. Do not apply chemicals without reading the labels first. The pesticide should be labeled for the target pest.
3. Avoid overapplications. That is just going to bring more issues such as pesticide resistance, phytotoxicity (killing your own grass), and risk of chemical runoff, which will create devastating side effects to the local fauna.

Conclusion

I am still investigating the potential causes of this outbreak in the valley, but the heavy concentration of true armyworm (*Mythimna unipuncta*) in urban developments and new housing tracts across the Treasure Valley is a classic ecological response to recent landscape disturbances. The fact that we had a mild winter might have also influenced the dispersal of this pest, as it spreads every year through a **massive, multi-generational seasonal migration**.

It is highly recommended to establish a monitoring program for this pest, as these episodic outbreaks could be minimized with proper forecasting actions.

NOTICE

This is a preliminary report based on the expertise of Dr. Armando Falcon and it has the intent to create awareness of this pest as well as educate the community in the Treasure Valley. A peer-reviewed publication is expected to be available in the next couple of months. The recommendations here are general and each person is responsible for using this information using their criteria. Reach out to the UI extension specialist if you have further questions.