

Cactus Moth (*Cactoblastis cactorum*)

Once hailed as a hero in Australia when it was introduced to control unwanted populations of exotic prickly pear cacti, the cactus moth has recently established itself as an American pest. Now it threatens native landscapes and agriculture in the Southern United States and Mexico.



Adult cactus moths (male on the left; female on the right).

Detection Strategies

1. Check for Larvae. Adult moths are difficult to identify without dissection. So the best detection strategy is to look for the cactus moth's distinctive larvae, or caterpillars. Mature larvae grow to a length of about 1.5 cm (0.5 in), and are reddish-orange with blackish spots forming transverse bands. In larvae in their final (sixth) instar, these transverse bands are nearly always divided into spots.



Cactus moth larvae.

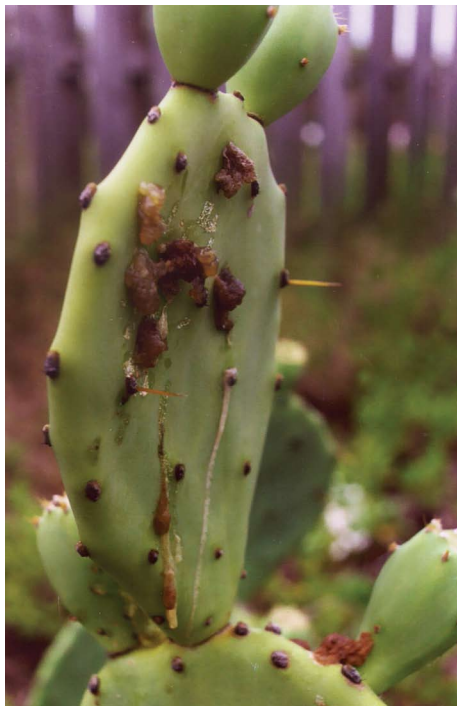


Cactus moth egg stick.

2. Check for Egg Sticks. Between late February and November, adult cactus moths lay chains of eggs called egg sticks that resemble the naturally occurring spines on prickly pear pads. The egg sticks are initially cream colored but darken to brown, and later almost black, shortly before the larvae emerge. The egg sticks look like prickly pear spines but are curved. An egg stick with about 70 eggs is approximately 2.4 cm (nearly 1 inch) long. Other native prickly pear-feeding moth species in the genus *Melitara* also lay their eggs in sticks. Their egg sticks cannot reliably be distinguished from those of the cactus moth.

3. Check for Hollowed Pads.

Cactus moth larvae live and feed communally inside the pads of prickly pear cacti. Damaged pads will show characteristic oozing of internal plant juices and insect droppings. Cactus moth larvae have been found to eat most prickly pear cactus with flat pads in the genus *Opuntia*. However, the members of the genus *Opuntia* known as “cholla” cactus are not normally hosts of the cactus moth.



Damage to prickly-pear cactus pad caused by larvae of the cactus moth.

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Photo credits: The photograph of the damaged prickly pear cactus was taken by Joel Floyd of APHIS Plant Protection and Quarantine. The remaining images were shot by Ignacio Baez, a biological science technician with USDA's Agricultural Research Service.

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For more information about this pest, please visit www.aphis.usda.gov/plant_health/plant_pest_info/cactoblastis/index.shtml.

