

The Saddleback: A Case of Erucism (Envenomation by a Caterpillar)

By Everett D. Cashatt
ISM Curator of Zoology

Of the nearly 11,000 species of butterflies and moths in the United States, there are at least 27 species that have stinging or urticating hairs in the caterpillar stage. These hairs may cause an irritation to the human skin in two ways. The hairs or setae are hollow, connected to a venom gland, and may be filled with venom. When the sharp tips puncture the skin, venom is released and produces a temporary stinging sensation, followed by inflammation and itching. In other species the irritation seems to be mainly a mechanical effect similar to that caused by glass fibers.

The Saddleback

One of the more common species in the eastern United States is the saddleback caterpillar, (*Sibine stimulea Clemens*), one of the slug caterpillars (Family Limacodidae). The larva reaches a length of about 20 millimeters and is bright green with a purplish-brown saddle mark across the middle of the back. The anterior and posterior ends are also purplish-brown and are armed with elongated protuberances bearing the stinging, spine-like setae. These spiny protuberances are called scoli. Smaller scoli are at each end of the caterpillar and along the sides. The head is small and may be retracted in to the body when not feeding. The saddleback has no prolegs but moves by means of sucker-like discs.

The Reaction

The severity of the reaction to the sting depends on the species of caterpillar, the sensitivity of the victim, and the part of the body affected. A physician should be consulted immediately if setae reach mucous membranes or the eyes. First aid treatment of other stung areas consists of applying alkaline compresses (ammonia water, bicarbonate of soda) or creams containing antihistamines. If symptoms do not subside within 24 hours, medical assistance should be sought.

The chance of being stung by a saddleback is fairly remote compared to the possibility of being stung by a bee or wasp. The saddleback is a passive, slow-moving caterpillar that usually remains hidden in the foliage on which it is feeding. Reports indicate that it feeds on oak, willow, cherry, pear, apple, blackberry, corn, paw-paw, canna, dahlia, holly, lily, magnolia, palm, rose, and other plants.