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Armyworms on the march, pillaging a lawn near you

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Tropical Storm Allison may have brought more than rain to New England last month: It may be responsible for *Pseudaletia unipuncta*.

Add this to your list of things you hope not to see in your lifetime: armies of caterpillars (appropriately called armyworms) literally devouring your lawn.

Infestations of *Pseudaletia unipuncta*, a grass and hay-eating caterpillar most often seen in the South, have been reported throughout southern New England, including isolated spots in the Connecticut Valley.

Where they hit, they hit hard. Lawns can be lost nearly overnight, reduced to expanses of brown. Then the caterpillars, perhaps tens of thousands of them, will march (thus their name) en masse to the next lawn or field to eat their way through that.

This past week, the Coombs Hill Farm in Colrain, a dairy farm with 30 acres of hay, has been the unlucky target.

"It's quite serious in the hayfields," said Sandra Coombs. "My husband thought the hay looked kind of funny so he went down there to take a look and there they were. It's a massive infestation. Just about every inch of ground is covered with them."

Did these voracious insects just drop from the sky? Sort of.

Armyworms do not over-winter in New England as a rule. The caterpillars hatch from eggs laid by armyworm moths, generally found south of Tennessee. Some entomologists believe Tropical Storm Allison, which swept from Texas up into New England in June, picked up great numbers of the moths in the mid-South and carried them into this region, eventually giving rise to the plague of caterpillars.

It's thought the downdraft winds of Allison deposited concentrations of the moths in particular areas, that the moths then gathered themselves and proceeded to lay eggs in those areas. (One female can lay up to 2,000 eggs.)

That would explain the great numbers of the caterpillars in some locations, as well as the more numerous reports of infestations in eastern and central Massachusetts than in the Connecticut Valley, said William M. Coli, an entomologist with the University of Massachusetts Extension. Allison only marginally affected the valley. However it dropped nearly a half foot of rain on much of central and eastern Massachusetts and Connecticut.

In eastern Massachusetts, the armyworm problem is being called "a once in a lifetime" event, given that a strange mix of timing and violent weather seems to have created the situation. In some places, 100 caterpillars per square foot have been counted. In Connecticut, more than 50 communities have reported infestations.

In the Connecticut Valley, they have been reported in Belchertown and Shutesbury in addition to Colrain.

Lawns, hayfields and golf course fairways have been taken over by the hungry legions. The young caterpillars are pale green and may resemble inchworms as they "loop" across the grass. A full-grown caterpillar, which may reach 1.5 inches in length, is often dark green with a stripe along each side of its body and a lighter stripe down its back.

"A lot of people have never heard of a problem like this before," said Stephen J. Herbert, also an entomologist with the UMass Extension.

He said armyworms can have two or three generations a summer. The moth lays its eggs, which take about six to 10 days to hatch. Then the caterpillars will eat for three or four weeks before forming cocoons in the soil from which the moths emerge to begin the process again. While the current infestations are intense, future generations this summer will be less concentrated, Herbert predicted.

When the next group of moths emerge, "They will start flying around and dispersing, so they will no longer be in one concentrated group. The population won't build up in the same way," he said.

The caterpillars prefer grass and hay but they will go after the leaves of crop plants, such as corn, potentially spoiling a crop.

"Sweet corn can be damaged as can peppers. We've put an alert out to growers about this to be on the watch," said John C. Howell, a vegetable specialist at the University of Massachusetts Extension.

Insecticides can be effective, he said, but they only work on the caterpillars when they are small.