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Campbell Vaughn: Brown patches in lawns could be a sign of an armyworm infestation

Campbell Vaughn Columnist

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Did all of a sudden, flocks of birds begin loitering on your bermuda lawn? Did you water the lawn yesterday morning and it just randomly turned brown? Well the official alert is out. Fall armyworms are here and if you live in a field of bermuda or bahiagrass, they will eat you out of your house and home.

We are getting a bunch of reports of them in the area so we need to be ready to treat them as needed.

The fall armyworm is the caterpillar of a moth that arrives in Georgia almost every year from Florida. Traveling via weather fronts, these moths spend the spring and summer traveling from south to north, gradually infesting our entire state.

Even in relatively mild years, the moths do not survive our winters, so they have to start their yearly Sunshine State exodus over every spring. The reason we don't normally see the armyworms until about this time of year is the lifecycle takes several generations of moths to work their way north to the Garden City.

An armyworm moth can lay eggs in batches of a few dozen to several hundred, allowing populations to grow rapidly throughout the summer. These eggs hatch after a few days and the caterpillars feed on mostly bermuda and bahiagrass, grow for two to three weeks and then pupate. A week or so later, the new adult moth emerges to start the cycle again. In the warm weather of summer, the cycle takes about four weeks to complete with 14 to 17 days spent as caterpillars feeding on the grass.

These infestations can wreak havoc on golf courses, ball fields, hay pastures and on occasion my backyard. Usually the damage is just the loss of the leaf blade of the grass and it will grow back, but occasionally they can cause more serious harm. Hay farmers can lose an entire cut

cycle from armyworm infestation which can really put a dent on these hard-working farmer's bottom line.

Campbell Vaughn: Rare bird for Georgia spotted on Ogeechee River fishing trip

Campbell Vaughn: Don't cut corners when mowing your lawn

One evening a couple of years ago, I looked out the window into my backyard bermuda lawn and saw my turf had a little yellow tint to it. My mower blade has been a little screwy and it has been too hot to mess around fixing it, so I thought it might be the cut I made when I mowed it a couple of days before. When I walked outside to check it out, I grabbed a 2-gallon bucket that we use to wash cars, added a couple of squirts of dish soap and filled it with hose water. I took the bucket out to an area of the lawn that looked kind of dull colored and dumped it on the grass. Ten seconds later, caterpillars in droves began to surface. Of course, me being the nerdy educator I am, I made my wife and daughter come out to watch me do it again so they could see it, too.

Apparently, fall armyworms hate bathing so they race to the surface to complain about being all soaped up. It was a pretty cool trick to watch.

One armyworm siting doesn't mean we need to send in a crop duster, so remember to be safe and read the labels on any control products before applying to your landscape.

The threshold for treating for infestation is three or more caterpillars per square foot of turf. For homeowner control of armyworm infestations, consider using the active ingredient spinosad (Bonide Captain Jack's) which is considered organic. Sevin with carbaryl is also a pretty safe insecticide, but try to apply late in the evening or early in the morning when pollinators are not as active.

It is hard to say how long the armyworms can be active, but stay on the lookout for them at least until the end of September or the first part of October.

