

NATURE NOTES - PALM LEAF SKELETONIZER

Submitted by Charlie Beck

The following insect life history was gleaned from a University of Florida IFAS Extension Factsheet.

Palm Leaf Skeletonizer causes unsightly leaf damage to a large variety of palms. The insect feeds only on palms. The damage begins when a palm-leaf skeletonizer moth (5/8" long) lays eggs on emergent fronds. Eggs hatch and caterpillars construct protective, dark tube-like structures on the bottom of the leaf. The caterpillars feed on the upper and lower leaf surfaces between the veins, so all that is left is the vein structure (skeleton) of the leaf. They deposit large quantities of unsightly brown fibrous excrement on the leaf surface. Several generations of this life cycle may occur in a year.



The IFAS Factsheet recommends homeowners control this insect by washing the fronds with a sponge or a water jet from a high pressure hose. For commercial growers and landscapers, they recommend various poisonous insecticides to control the problem. They noted that there are several biological controls but the parasitoids and parasites are not commercially available.

I have observed this kind of damage in our garden. It seems to come and go on specific palms but it's always present somewhere in the garden. I know the damage is cosmetic and palms are tough enough to survive even the most severe infestation. I accept that this is a part of growing palms in a pesticide-free garden.

Sometimes researchers are so focused on traditional solutions of pest control, that they miss the big picture. Entomologists may be very effective at studying the life cycle of a pest, but might miss how that pest plays a role in the environment.

I recently noticed another biological control that was left out of the IFAS Factsheet. Lounging in our spa, I had full view of a mature *Pritchardia vuykstekeana*. This palm had quite a bit of damage from the Palm Leaf Skeletonizer, but not enough to destroy its beauty. The new fronds were undamaged and the inflorescences were in full bloom with bright yellow flowers. One day I noticed a Yellowthroat Warbler flying to and from that palm. It landed on the bottom side of the frond and ate the caterpillars. It could only hold on upside down for a limited time so it flew back to a tree perch to rest. Then it repeated the process. I saw that bird cleaning that palm of caterpillars for three days straight. I was impressed with its tenacity.

Sometimes it's best to let insects remain part of the ecological system. All of the wildlife interrelationships are not fully understood- not even by the experts. Wood Warbler migration through Florida has been in steep decline over the past 30 years. You don't need to read research to convince yourself of this. All you need to do is observe nature. I now perceive Palm Leaf Skeletonizers in a new light - a smorgasbord for our migrating birds.