

Tiki Hut Caterpillar: *Simplicia cornicalis*

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Tiki Huts and Chickees

Tiki huts, made from the leaves of [cabbage palms](#), are an iconic sight in Central and South Florida. They symbolize a casual “out-of-door” gathering place making up the roofs of bars, restaurants, and as locations for general respite. Chickees are thatched elevated platforms originally developed and used by the Seminole and Miccosukee Indians. Native Americans of South Florida still use Chickees as sites for social gatherings and activities.

Insect Distribution

In 2006, the moth *Simplicia cornicalis* (Fabricius) (Lepidoptera: Erebidae) was found in Central Florida. It was first reported in Lee County in 2014. The species is known throughout Southeast and East Asia, from India to Southern Japan, to Australia and New Guinea, as well as from Hawaii and the South Pacific Islands. Its eventual spread throughout Florida, Mexico and Central America is possible. The larvae feed mostly on dried plant leaves, plant debris and particularly palm thatch. Due to its association with palm thatch roofs, we have been calling it the Tiki hut caterpillar.

What to Look For

Palm debris and thatch appear to be the favorite food of Tiki hut caterpillars. Here is what is known.

- The larvae have not been found on dead fronds still attached to living cabbage palms.
- Infestations apparently occur on fronds cut and thatched within the last six months.
- The larvae begin feeding as soon as two to three weeks after thatching.
- During the day, the larvae conceal themselves among the thatch and must be sought after to be found.
- After dark, the larvae emerge from among the thatch and feed on the surface of roofs.
- Feeding holes and frass from the caterpillars are clearly visible on the roof.
- The larvae are food for frogs, lizards, and birds.

What to Do

Treatment protocol is still being worked out, but here is what is recommended.

- For Tiki hut builders, Pyrethroids such as Scimitar, Talstar, Tempo, or products containing Bifenthrin should stave off the caterpillars. Apply by spraying both sides of the fronds at the time of thatching.
- For infested roofs, apply insecticides like *B.t.* (*Bacillus thuringiensis*), Spinosad, or a Pyrethroids to the top of the roof. This is best done at dusk when the caterpillars are emerging from the thatch to feed.
- Getting the products to the caterpillars inside a layer of thatch may be the most difficult problem. Use a concentrated spray for greater efficiency.
- Read the product labels to ensure they are registered for this kind of use.
- Fumigation is not generally recommended because the lack of residual treatment makes the thatch susceptible to reinfestation.

Tiki Hut Caterpillar



Roof infested with *Simplicia cornicalis*.



Damage caused by *Simplicia cornicalis*.

Tiki Hut Caterpillar



Larvae and pupa

Lyle Buss



Larva on leaf blade



Lyle Buss

Larva of *Simplicia cornicalis*

References

Dickel, T. S., V. A. Brou, Jr., and J. B. Heppner. 2010. [New North American Records of the Asian Species, *Simplicia cornicalis*, in Florida and Louisiana](#). *Lepidoptera Novae*, Vol. 3. No. 1. Gainesville, Florida

Vargo, J. 2007. [Simplicia cornicalis](#). Mississippi Entomological Museum at Mississippi State University, Meridian, Mississippi

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This fact sheet was reviewed by Dr. William Kern, Jr. Entomologist, University of Florida Ft. Lauderdale Research and Education Center, Fort Lauderdale, Florida.

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