



Eastern Comma Caterpillar

Dr. Heather Darby, Agronomic Specialist and Scott Lewins, Entomologist

The eastern comma caterpillar, *Polygonia comma* (Harris), is a minor pest commonly found in Northeastern hopyards. It is also known as the “hop merchant” because growers in the early 1900s would base their projections for the year’s prices on the degree of the chrysalis’s golden luster. Though they are covered with ominous looking spikes, these caterpillars are harmless to the touch, and seemingly harmless to hop growers’ bottom line.



Figure 1. Eastern comma butterfly (Photo credit: Ryan Kaldari).

and is easily distinguished from the closely related eastern question mark, *Polygonia interrogationis* (Fabricius), because it lacks the dot of the question mark (Figure 1). Their green eggs are sculptured with a series of vertical ridges, and laid either singly or in stacks of two or three on the underside of hop leaves (Figure 2). The body color of the larvae is highly variable, from white to greenish-brown to black, with branching spines all over the head and body (Figure 3). Eastern comma caterpillars are the only stage that can damage the hop plant. The caterpillar can grow to be up to 1¼ inches in length before pupating and eventually emerging as a butterfly.

The adult butterfly is orange and black, and varies in color depending on the time of the year because there are two generations per year, the summer form and winter form, which overwinters. The eastern comma butterfly can be identified by the silvery comma on the middle of the hind wing,

The eastern comma has not historically been considered a pest of economic importance, likely because the Pacific Northwest, where most of the hops industry has taken root, is outside of the eastern comma’s habitat range. However, since the reemergence of the commercial hop industry in the Northeast, the eastern comma has remained a relatively minor concern to growers because their damage doesn’t seem to affect hop yields at harvest.



Figure 2. Stacks of eastern comma eggs.



Figure 3. Eastern comma caterpillars chewing away on a hop bine.

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