



Mourningcloak butterfly

Nymphalis antiopa

Order Lepidoptera, Family Nymphalidae;
brush-footed butterflies
Native pest

Host plants: Elm, cottonwood, willow, hackberry, birch, linden, and poplars

Description: Adult butterflies have dark red-brown wings with a creamy-yellow border and blue spots. They have a wingspan of 60–80 mm. Mature larvae, which are black with scattered small white spots, have a single row of red spots along their back. Prolegs are also red. Rows of large branched spines run along the body, which can reach 10 mm in length.

Life history: Adults emerge in early spring and deposit eggs on twigs. After hatching, young larvae feed gregariously, at first under silken shelters, and later openly. There can be two generations per year.

Overwintering: Adults.

Damage symptoms: Larvae consume leaves, mostly on terminal branches but sometimes throughout the tree.

Monitoring: Look for clusters of eggs around twigs in early spring. Two to 3 weeks later and through July larvae are present. Chrysalides are formed in July and butterflies appear in late July.

Chemical control: Do not kill these larvae. The amount of leaves eaten will not damage the host. Larvae hatch into beautiful, native butterflies called “harbinger of spring,” as it is usually the first butterfly of the spring.

Biological control: Numerous species of parasitoids attack these nymphalid larvae.

Plant mortality risk: Low

Biorational pesticides: None

Conventional pesticides: None



Defoliation damage caused by mourningcloak butterfly larva (bottom); butterfly adult nectar feeding (top). (172)
Photo: Whitney Cranshaw



Mourningcloak butterfly adult. (171)
Photo: Whitney Cranshaw



Close-up of mourningcloak butterfly larva. (173)
Photo: Whitney Cranshaw