

Golf courses, aeration, and black cutworms

Black cutworm is one of the more common caterpillar pests of golf course turf. They normally take up residence on golf course greens and will create characteristic burrows, circular patches of dead turf, and depressions in the green. One interesting tactic they may employ is to inhabit some of the aeration holes on your green. Of course, you shouldn't let this deter you from this important maintenance task, aeration doesn't attract caterpillars it's simply a "life hack" for savvy caterpillars.

If you are worried you are dealing with black cutworms on your greens, you can use a dish soap drench to check for them. Simply mix at least a fluid ounce of Lemon Joy dish soap into a gallon of water, mix, and pour onto the green. If you find 3-8 caterpillars per square yard you will likely want to follow up with an insecticide application. Spinosad and bifenthrin can both be used for large caterpillars while an early season application of chlorantraniliprole will help to minimize small caterpillars.

Regular green maintenance will also suppress black cutworms. Consistent mowing will actually clip off where adult cutworms lay their eggs on grass blades. This will routinely eliminate more than 70% of the eggs laid. One caveat is that you will need to take the clippings at least 100 yards away from any green, as if the eggs do hatch the cutworms will crawl at least that far to inhabit a green. If mowing occurs at or before 5:30 am you will also catch foraging caterpillars before they return to their burrow and mulch them up with the blades. Aerating to minimize thatch buildup will also reduce living places for the caterpillars.

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Figure 1: (Left) The larval black cutworm is a dark colored and stout caterpillar with black dots running down its side. They will tend to curl up when disturbed. (Right) The face of the enemy. Both photos courtesy of James Kalisch, UNL Entomology.



Figure 2: An aeration hole that is being inhabited by an opportunistic black cutworm. Photo by Dr. Bill Kreuser