



PestFacts WA

Issue: 3
Date: May 2026

Contents

- [Weed web moth and other caterpillars are damaging crops](#)
- [Seeing cockchafer damage after seeding?](#)
- [Tips for effectively monitoring early-season insect pests](#)

- weed web moth
- cabbage centre grub
- pasture day moth

Weed web moth and other caterpillars are damaging crops

Moths have been migrating into crops to lay eggs on emerging seedlings, and it is a crucial time to assess crops for signs of caterpillar damage. A post-emergent insecticide may be needed to stop subsequent chewing damage from these sneaky critters.

Forecasted warmer-than-average autumn temperatures, combined with recent rainfall, are favouring pest moth build-up in early sown crops, weeds and crop volunteers, increasing the risk of caterpillar damage in emerging crops.

Look out for the following species actively feeding on young plants during autumn:

- brown pasture looper
- cutworm
- webworm

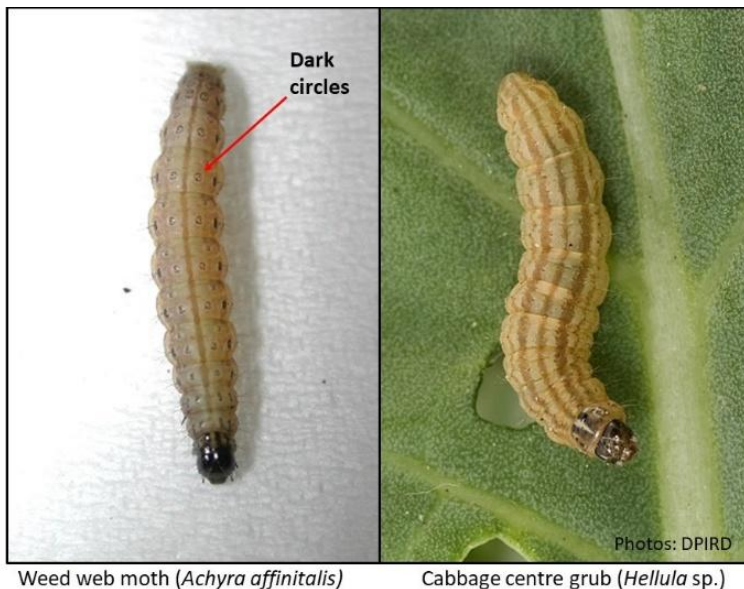
Pest caterpillar species can often be differentiated by their size, feeding behaviour and host preference. Diagnostic information can be found in the 2024 PestFacts WA Issue 2 article [Caterpillar pests - how to recognise them in your crop.](#)

If caterpillars are small and hard to distinguish you can request an identification by using the [PestFacts WA Reporter app](#). Your reports also contribute to the interactive PestFacts WA service which issues warnings of pest outbreaks.

Weed web moth and cabbage centre grub

- Binu
- Tenindewa
- Northam
- Nomans Lake/ Toolibin

Two similar web-producing species, weed web moth and cabbage centre grub, have been found actively feeding on weeds and some establishing crops in the northern and central grain regions. Their larvae are similar in size and appearance but can be distinguished by their feeding damage.



Weed web moth (*Achyra affinalis*)

Cabbage centre grub (*Hellula* sp.)

The weed web moth caterpillar (left) can be distinguished from the cabbage centre grub caterpillar (right) by the presence of dark circles along its body. Photos courtesy of DPIRD.

David Stead (Anasazi Agronomy) found weed web moth caterpillars damaging 3-4 leaf canola near Northam. The early sown crop would have attracted moths, which fly in at night and lay eggs on leaves. The weed web moth can build up to large numbers where there has been an abundance of green plant material (pasture/broad-leafed weeds) and warm, dry weather which favours their development. Recent rain and cooler weather may slow caterpillar development and plants may recover from the damage.

Grower Raylene Burns reports that cabbage centre grub larvae have damaged more than 30% of canola seedlings at the 4 true leaves stage at Binu. The crop was sown on 25 March and germinated on 30 March. A post emergent insecticide will be incorporated with the next herbicide application to prevent further damage.

Agworld users have also reported weed web moth and cabbage centre grub damage to canola and wheat crops at Binu and Tenindewa.

Nick McKenna (Independent Rural) has found significant numbers of weed web moth caterpillars in weedy pasture at Tenindewa.

Jess Carmichael (FarmWorks Narrogin) found both weed web moth and cutworm caterpillars in a newly seeded oat crop at Nomans Lake near Narrogin. The oats were sown into a paddock which was previously long-term pasture.



Weed web worm caterpillars feeding damage on 3-4 leaf canola. Photo courtesy of David Stead (Anasazi Agronomy).



Weed web moth caterpillars, 15-20mm in length, spin webbing between leaves and shreds or skeletonises foliage of canola, lupins and other broad leaf hosts. These caterpillars wriggle rapidly when disturbed, often grey/green, with a dark head and dark spots along their body. Photo courtesy of DPIRD.



Cabbage centre grub, approx. 15mm, cream in colour with red-brown stripes along the body and a dark head. Larvae spin webbing and tunnel into growing points of canola and cause blister-like feeding damage. Photo courtesy of Raylene Burns (Kalinya Farming Co.)

Weed web moth (*Achyra affinalis*) and cabbage centre grubs (*Hellula hydralis*) are web producing native moth species of the Crambidae family. They often leave silken webbing at ground level amongst dead and living plant material and caterpillars can be found concealed between leaf surfaces glued together by silken web and chewed plant material.

Usually considered minor establishment pests, these warm weather caterpillars disappear as the weather cools. If warm conditions continue in the northern and central regions, moisture stressed seedling canola may be at risk from outbreaks of weed web moth and cabbage centre grub. For more information about these pests, refer to the Grains Research and Development Corporation's (GRDC) [Weed web moth](#) fact sheet.

Native budworm and lesser budworm

- Tenindewa
- Calingiri
- Bolgart



Budworm caterpillars feeding on canola seedlings after emerging from nearby pasture paddock. Photo courtesy of Lester Snooke (Bolgart Rural).

David Pfeiffer (Synergy Consulting) has reported both native budworm and lesser budworm caterpillars feeding on a canola crop near Bolgart and Calingiri. The caterpillars had moved into the canola crop from the nearby pasture paddock.



Native budworm caterpillar with black hair (smallest caterpillar in image), and lesser budworm caterpillars with white hairs (largest caterpillars in image), found in canola crop after emerging from nearby pasture paddock. Photo courtesy of Lester Snooke (Bolgart Rural).

Lesser budworm caterpillars look similar to native budworm caterpillars but have white hairs and prefer cereal and grass hosts.



Microscope images showing the black hairs of Helicoverpa punctigera and white hairs of Heliiothis punctifera. Note that the colour of both species can vary from pale yellow/green to dark brown and is not a good indication of species. Photo courtesy of DPIRD.

Nick McKenna (Independent Rural) has found significant numbers of lesser budworm in weedy pasture at Tenindewa. This follows previous reports of lesser budworm caterpillars being found on grass plants such as button grass.

Native budworm is a major pest of pulse and canola crops and can cause serious yield loss to canola as pods mature. At this time of year, they may be found feeding on volunteer lupins, clovers and weeds and transfer onto new crops. For more information refer to DPIRD's [Native budworm](#) page

Identifying other caterpillar pests

Chewing damage to the leaves may be all that is seen if the caterpillars are nocturnal feeders. Digging around the base of damaged plants during the day may reveal concealed cutworm or webworm caterpillars.

Cutworm caterpillars are large, up to 50 mm, and will chew large pieces of plant, often to ground level.

Webworm caterpillars grow to 15 mm long, only attack cereal crops and other grasses, and will pull severed leaves into their web-lined tunnels near the base of damaged plants.

Brown pasture looper caterpillars can be seen on plants during the day and move with a looping motion and have black and cream stripes. They have wide host range and will move in to crops from weeds or adjacent pasture, attacking the edge of crops first. They do most damage when they are larger than 20 mm.

Cutworm, brown pasture looper and webworm caterpillars can be a threat to crops sown into paddocks that have had green plants for several weeks. Control of caterpillars before sowing crops into these paddocks is the best strategy to reduce risk of chewing damage of crops.

Pasture day moth caterpillars may also be present in paddocks during the day. These hairy black/brown caterpillars with two yellow spots near their end feed on broadleaf pasture species and weeds and are rarely a pest of canola.

Managing caterpillars and considering beneficials

Growers are advised to monitor their paddocks for caterpillar activity and only spray if they are present and feeding on the crop. Under good growing conditions crops are likely to outgrow damage.

If caterpillar numbers warrant spraying then growers and consultants can refer to DPIRD's [2026 autumn winter insecticide guide](#).

Insecticides are registered for most caterpillar pests. Cabbage centre grubs may be listed as centre grub on labels.

Weed web moth and cabbage centre grubs can be difficult to control using contact insecticides as they produce webbing between leaves forming a protective layer around themselves. Difficulty with control has occurred in the past because these pests require about two to three times the rates of synthetic pyrethroid insecticides that are commonly used against cutworm and pasture webworm.

Growers should consider insecticide options that are soft on predator insects if spraying. For details on insecticide toxicity to beneficial insects, refer to Cesar Australia's [Beneficials chemical toxicity table](#).

Further Information

For more information on caterpillar pests, contact Research Scientists [Svetlana Micic](#) in Albany on +61 8 9892 8591 and [Dusty Severtson](#) in Northam on +61 8 9690 2160.

Article author: Bec Severtson (DPIRD Northam).

Seeing cockchafer damage after seeding?



Cockchafer larva feeding on the roots of a barley seedling, at approx. 5 cm soil depth, North Lake Grace. Photo courtesy of DPIRD.

Cockchafers, a type of scarab beetle larva, have historically caused recurring crop damage in some paddocks, particularly in the 'Lakes' district, including the shires of Wickepin, Dumbleyung, Kondinin, Kulin, and Lake Grace. Outbreaks are sporadic and infestations have been very difficult, or impossible, to control with foliar insecticides and some commonly used seed dressings. Root and crown feeding has led to significant crop damage and failures in some years.

What to look for

- C-shaped white larvae ("curl grubs"), 5 to 30 mm long, brought to the soil surface at seeding
- Signs of wilting in cereal seedlings at the 2 to 3-leaf stage
- Areas of yellow seedlings and bare patches in germinating crops

Confirm the presence of larvae by digging 5-10 cm below the soil surface near damaged seedlings. Some growers have reported seeing crows gathering behind the airseeder to feed on larvae brought to the surface.



Bare patches in a barley paddock visible after cockchafer root and crown feeding, at Kondinin. Photo courtesy of DPIRD.

Seeking live cockchafer larvae

If you are finding suspected cockchafers and/or damage in emerging crops, particularly on properties in the 'Lakes' district, please contact us. Contact DPIRD Research Scientists [Christiaan Valentine](#) and [Dusty Severtson](#) to arrange a paddock visit to collect live specimens and assess the extent of damage using drone imagery.

The Grains Research and Development Corporation (GRDC) has initiated a three-year study with DPIRD researchers to explore management strategies for pest scarab species of WA grain crops. Additionally, GRDC has included collection and molecular sequencing of cockchafer specimens from affected regions within the National Grains Diagnostic and Surveillance Initiative (NGDSI) to confirm species identity and establish a diagnostic baseline.

We are also interested in cockchafer reports from anywhere in the WA grainbelt. You can make a report via the [PestFacts WA Reporter app](#), or by emailing the team at pestfactswa@dpiird.wa.gov.au.

Identifying the destructive species

There are more than 300 known species of native cockchafers in WA, with many more undescribed. While most are not pests, there are multiple species that are involved in crop damage, each with its own unique life cycle, ecology and distribution.

Only the larval stage (grubs) causes crop damage. Adult beetles are brown, reddish brown or almost black, ranging from 5-20 mm long depending on the species, and are only seen for a very short time during summer.

Correctly identifying the species of cockchafers is difficult and confusing and often requires dissection of male adult genitalia by expert taxonomists. There are currently no guides available to identify larvae of WA pest species. African black beetle larvae can be distinguished from native species by the horizontal orientation of its anal opening.

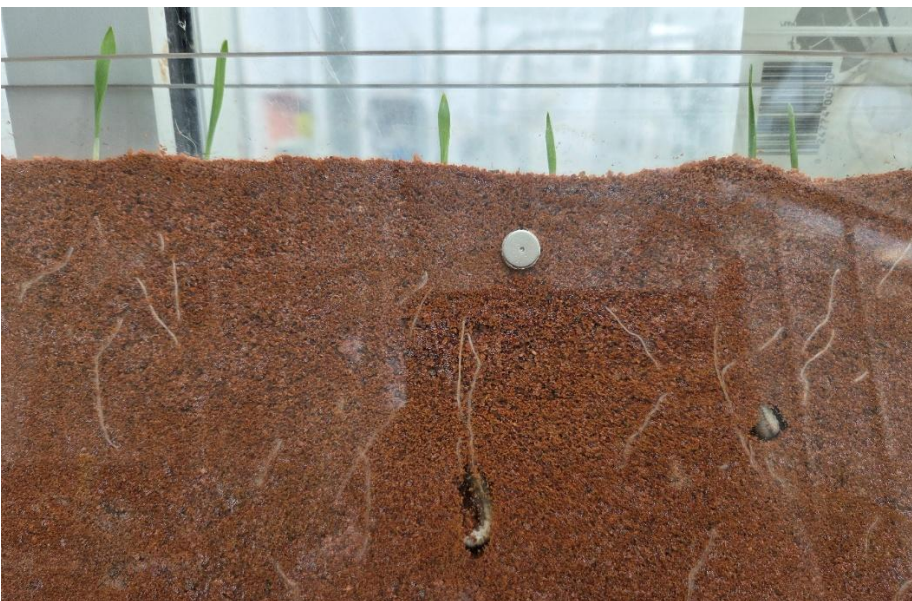
Cockchafer rearing

To identify the species responsible for crop damage, DPIRD research scientists are rearing adults from field-collected larvae in tubs of potted barley. This process can take up to 6-18 months, depending on the age of larvae at the time of collection.

A new species of native cockchafer was recently identified by DPIRD taxonomist Andras Szito as a culprit for extensive barley damage at North Lake Grace and subclover pasture damage at Kuender. It represents an undescribed native species of the *Scitala* genus.



Barley seedlings in cockchafer rearing tubs; note the yellow barley seedlings from root-chewing damage. Photo courtesy of DPIRD.



Cockchafer larvae feeding on barley roots in a Perspex rearing 'farm'. Some shoots were pulled into the soil as they were consumed. Photo courtesy of DPIRD.

Molecular identification

Integrating field trapping of cockchafer larvae or adults with molecular identification has become more accessible. Dr Wei Xu and Dr Aniruddha Agnihotri from Murdoch University are using DNA barcoding to identify and distinguish the damaging cockchafer species collected from the Lakes district. DNA sequences from unidentified specimens are compared to reference sequences from identified species.

Investigating life cycles

An understanding of the damaging cockchafer species present, and their life cycles, could help prevent the persistence of resident populations by targeting larvae in the ground or adults as they emerge from the soil to mate.

Many native cockchafers have a 2-year life cycle, and larvae can feed on crop roots over 2 cropping seasons with more damage visible during the second year. Larvae descend deep into the soil after feeding to pupate and emerge as adults in late spring or summer, often swarming around trees after dusk to mate and lay eggs.



Cockchafer life cycle stages: larva, pupa and adult (adult beetle approx. 12 mm in length). Photos courtesy of DPIRD.

A well-known pest cockchafer, *Heteronyx obesa*, was identified causing extensive crop damage in 1989, 1991 and 1993 in the Harrismith area and continues to persist in affected paddocks today. This species was found to have a highly synchronised 2-year life cycle. In the 1990s, Agriculture WA (now DPIRD) researchers Andras Szito and Rob Emery, showed that the most effective strategy to combat crop damage from this species was re-sowing bare areas at a higher seeding rate. However, with significant crop damage seen in recent years and with new species discovered, DPIRD researchers are testing new treatments to see if they can kill the larvae or at least deter them, including seed dressings and in-furrow insecticide treatments.

Further information

You can read more about cockchafer damage in the Lakes district in the GRDC Groundcover articles, February 2026 [Hunt is on to ID and control damaging mystery cockchafer](#) and March 2026 [Eyes down in search of cockchafer larvae](#).

For more information contact Research Scientists [Dusty Severtson](#) in Northam on +61 8 9690 2160, or [Christiaan Valentine](#) in Northam on +61 8 9690 2197.

Article authors: Bec Severtson, Christiaan Valentine and Dusty Severtson (DPIRD Northam).

Tips for effectively monitoring early-season insect pests



Slater feeding damage on canola seedlings. Photo courtesy of DPIRD.

Early-season pest monitoring is critical for protecting emerging crops, but visible feeding damage does not always indicate which insect is responsible. Many invertebrates are well camouflaged, nocturnal, or feed below ground, allowing populations to build up unnoticed.

Effective surveillance relies on using the appropriate monitoring methods at the right time and correctly identifying both pests and beneficial insects.

Why early monitoring matters

Inspecting crops regularly from emergence until establishment, usually three to five weeks after sowing, is essential for early detection of pest problems. Early monitoring helps reduce the risk of economic loss.

Effective monitoring should:

- use surveillance methods that specifically target key pests of seedling crops
- include checks for beneficial insects that prey on target pests
- correctly identify the insect.

Inspecting plants

Look for missing or damaged seedlings

Walk along seeding rows and look for:

- Missing plants that may have been chewed off at the base
- Seedlings with visible chewing damage.

These signs often provide the first clue of pest activity.

Interpreting feeding damage

Understanding the preferred feeding methods and mouth parts of insects can help narrow down the likely culprit.

Chewing damage

Chewing pests include:

- Caterpillars (such as webworm or cutworm)
- European earwigs
- Weevils
- Beetles.

Key distinctions:

- European earwigs leave jagged cuts in the leaf which can be confused with slug/snail damage
- Young caterpillars often create windows in leaves, which can be confused with lucerne flea damage.

Sucking damage

Wilting and yellowing of plants usually indicate pests with piercing and sucking mouthparts, such as:

- Aphids
- Rutherglen bugs.

These pests are generally easy to find on affected plants.

Check for ground-dwelling pests

Some pests hide under debris or feed below the soil surface.

When inspecting:

- Look around and beneath chewed or missing plants.
- Check under leaf litter and stubble in the inter-rows.
- Inspect on warm, sunny afternoons when ground pests are more active
- Use a magnifying lens to help detect small pests.

Pests like cockchafer grubs attack plant roots, so digging below the surface is important.

Using pitfall traps

Pitfall traps are a simple and effective tool for detecting elusive ground pests.



A simple pitfall trap, consisting of a plastic cup in the ground, and a white pole to mark its location. Photo courtesy of DPIRD.

To set one:

1. Dig a hole near plants with visible feeding damage and place a plastic cup so the rim is level with the soil surface.
2. Add about 10mL of water into it.
3. Leave for 24 hours and check for captured insects.

Pitfall traps are particularly useful for detecting earth mites, beetles, weevils, slaters and European earwigs.

However, as pest activity varies, a single pitfall trap may not be sufficient. Consider placing at least 3–5 pitfall traps, and you may need to leave them out for multiple nights.

As part of the GRDC co-investment, the National Grains Diagnostics and Surveillance Initiative (NGDSI), DPIRD is conducting a remotely monitored pitfall trap surveillance program across the grainbelt this season for redlegged earth mite hatching and activity. Findings will be regularly shared via the PestFacts WA newsletter.

Shelter traps

Some ground pests are only active at night. If night searches are not practical then shelter traps can be left overnight to provide a cool, moist and dark environment for pests to shelter in during the day, and these are easily monitored. Hessian bags and carpet squares are commonly used. These are useful for detecting cutworm, earwigs, millipedes, slugs and snails.

Diagnosing and reporting insects

If you find an unfamiliar insect, it may be an incidental or it could be a new pest species. You can request a free diagnosis from the PestFacts WA team by taking photos and emailing pestfactswa@dpiird.wa.gov.au or submitting an identification request through the PestFactsWA Reporter app.

Management

If pest insects are found during these various surveillance methods, growers and consultants should make note of the following:

- the type of insect
- the number of plants affected
- the severity of damage to individual crop plants
- the area of crop affected by the pest

The next step is to determine whether the crop is likely to suffer further economic damage. When deciding whether the pest should be controlled, take into consideration factors such as:

- whether the crop is outgrowing the damage
- the stage of insect development
- potential for crop yield/income loss
- other environmental conditions (which are likely to influence pest survival)
- level of predators/parasitoids present
- cost of control.

If the crop is not outgrowing the damage and spraying is warranted, growers and consultants should refer to DPIRD's [2026 autumn winter insecticide guide](#).

Chemical choice is important, as several crop pests have developed resistance to commonly used insecticides, including redlegged earth mite, green peach aphid, and diamondback moth.

Growers should consider insecticide options that are soft on predator insects if spraying. For a list of insecticides with their toxicity to beneficial insects, refer to Cesar Australia's [Beneficials Chemical Toxicity Table](#).

When an insecticide treatment has been applied, it is important to go back and continue monitoring to ensure it has been successful. In some cases, the pests may still be alive, as often happens with weevils, which typically require higher doses of insecticide, or redlegged earth mites, which may be resistant.

More information

For more information on monitoring insects in emerging crops, refer to DPIRD's [How to monitor for early season pests](#) YouTube video and the Grains Research and Development Corporation (GRDC) [I SPY manual](#).

For more information on sustainable pest management in crops, refer to the GRDC [IPM Checklist](#) fact sheet.

For more information, contact Senior research scientist [Svetlana Micic](#) in Albany on +61 (0)8 9892 8591.

Article authors: Cindy Webster (DPIRD Narrogin), Bec Severtson (DPIRD Northam) and Svetlana Micic (DPIRD Albany).

Important Disclaimer

The Chief Executive Officer of the Department of Primary Industries and Regional Development and the State of Western Australia accept no liability whatsoever by reason of negligence or otherwise arising from the use or release of this information or any part of it.

Copyright © State of Western Australia (Department of Primary Industries and Regional Development), 2026.