

# The Spotted *Apatelodes* American Dagger Moth Impostor

JUST ANOTHER AMERICAN DAGGER moth, I thought. But something did not look right. Best to bring it inside to verify its identity. While the yellow hair indicated American dagger moth, the pair of midabdominal black lashes were missing and the hairs were much longer and had a swept-back look. On further inspection, I noticed the shorter black lashes along the middle. Its well-hidden mid-abdominal prolegs were red and clinched the identification. A spotted *apatelodes* (*Apatelodes torrefacta*)! I had hoped to find one someday after I had seen the feisty-looking adult moth in Florida. And to think I almost missed it.

I found the caterpillar by our front door on witch hazel, one of the many deciduous trees and shrubs it is known to feed on. I thanked it profusely for its choice of host trees. No need to put on a long-sleeve shirt and tuck the pant legs into knee-high rubber boots to procure its food.

After a couple of days feeding, the caterpillar shed its skin. Its hairs were now white and it took a few hours for them to fully fluff out.



*Shed yellow skin, left; white caterpillar, right (Ilse Gebbard)*



*A few hours later with hairs all fluffed out (Ilse Gebhard)*

A week later, the caterpillar stopped feeding and started to roam about the jar. It measured one and a half inches, so I deemed it fully grown. I had read that the species overwinters as a naked pupa in the ground. Time to add a two-inch deep layer of peat moss to the jar. It continued to roam around the rest of the day, making me wonder about the accuracy of what I had read. Sometime during the night, the caterpillar did burrow into the peat moss.



*Spotted apatelodes moth ready to kick butt (Russ Schipper)*

While you can't see the transformation to adult butterfly or moth inside the pupa, those caterpillars that pupate above ground at least let you observe their pupating process. Not so with spotted apatelodes, hidden in peat moss. Would it pupate and make it through the winter successfully on our screened-in porch? Only time would tell. That time did come the following spring, when the moth emerged in mid-June. It looked just as feisty as I remembered it, head down, abdomen raised high above the thorax.