

# What the h\*#& is head-clipping my wheat?

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**Picture credits (unless stated)**  
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The rule of thumb with insect-feeding on wheat is that as long as the flag leaf remains, feeding lower down on the plant usually does not impact yield. However, head clipping is a bigger concern, as yield is directly lost. In Michigan, true armyworm is the most common insect culprit, although there are several other species that clip as they feed. Head clipping usually happens only under high larval pressure, when caterpillars have already eaten the leaves and run out of food.

The armyworm threshold at heading (2 per square foot) builds in a cushion for head-clipping. The decision to spray headed wheat should be based on a combination of the following:

- \*\* the field is over threshold, with caterpillars under 1.5 inches long  
(bigger larvae will stop feeding and pupate soon)
- \*\* potential yield loss from tracks in the field  
(reduced by aerial application or wide spray boom)
- \*\* expected pre-harvest interval  
(pyrethroid PHIs range from 14 to 30 days)



Clipped head on the ground



Defoliated wheat field in Sanilac County Michigan, June 2007

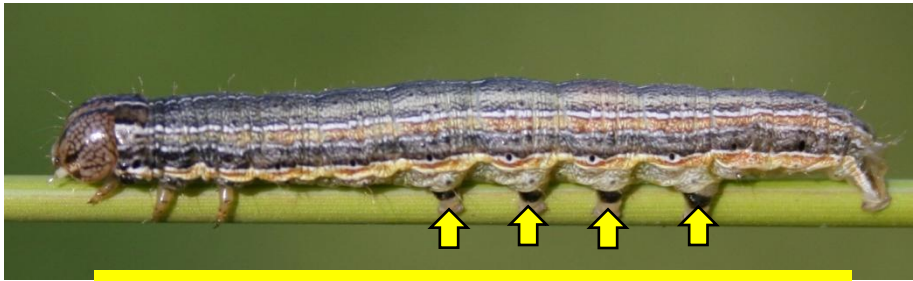


## Potential culprits for head-clipping

### True Armyworm

Feeds on wheat, corn, other crops and turf.

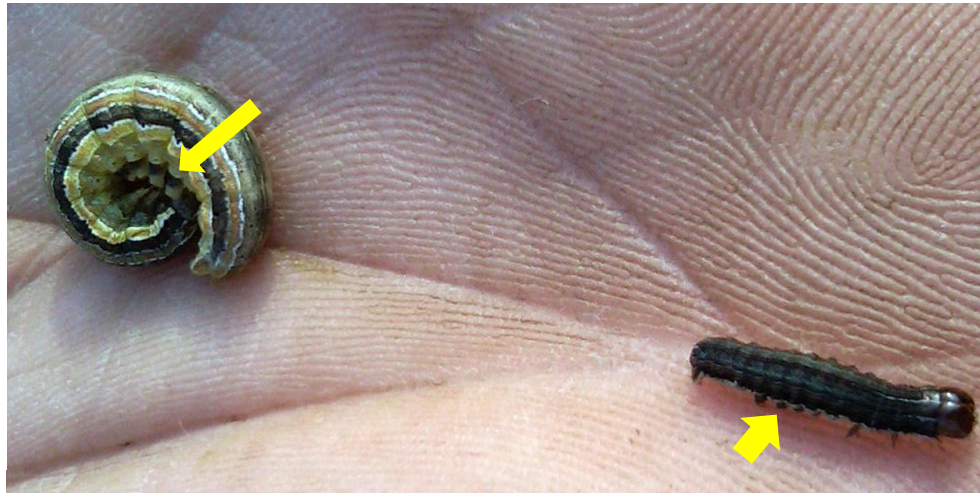
Adults colonize Michigan from the south each season, so infestations vary from year-to-year and field-to-field.



ID: Distinct DARK BARS on the PROLEGS

True armyworms can differ a great deal in color, depending on their size and what they are eating.

Despite the difference in appearance, both caterpillars in this picture, found in a Montcalm County wheat field, are army worms (arrows point to dark bars on prolegs).



### Grass Sawfly

NOT a caterpillar. Sawflies are in the order Hymenoptera with bees, wasps, and ants.

Feeds on turf as well as crops like wheat.

Not common in most years.



ID: More than 5 PAIRS of fleshy PROLEGS (it looks 'leggy')

### Wheathead Armyworm

Uncommon; I've never seen one, but Michigan is in its range. This caterpillar likes to feed on the head itself and eats kernels. Probably does more kernel feeding than clipping.



Frank Peairs, CSU

ID: Light broad stripe down side. Body tapers towards rear. NO dark bars on legs.