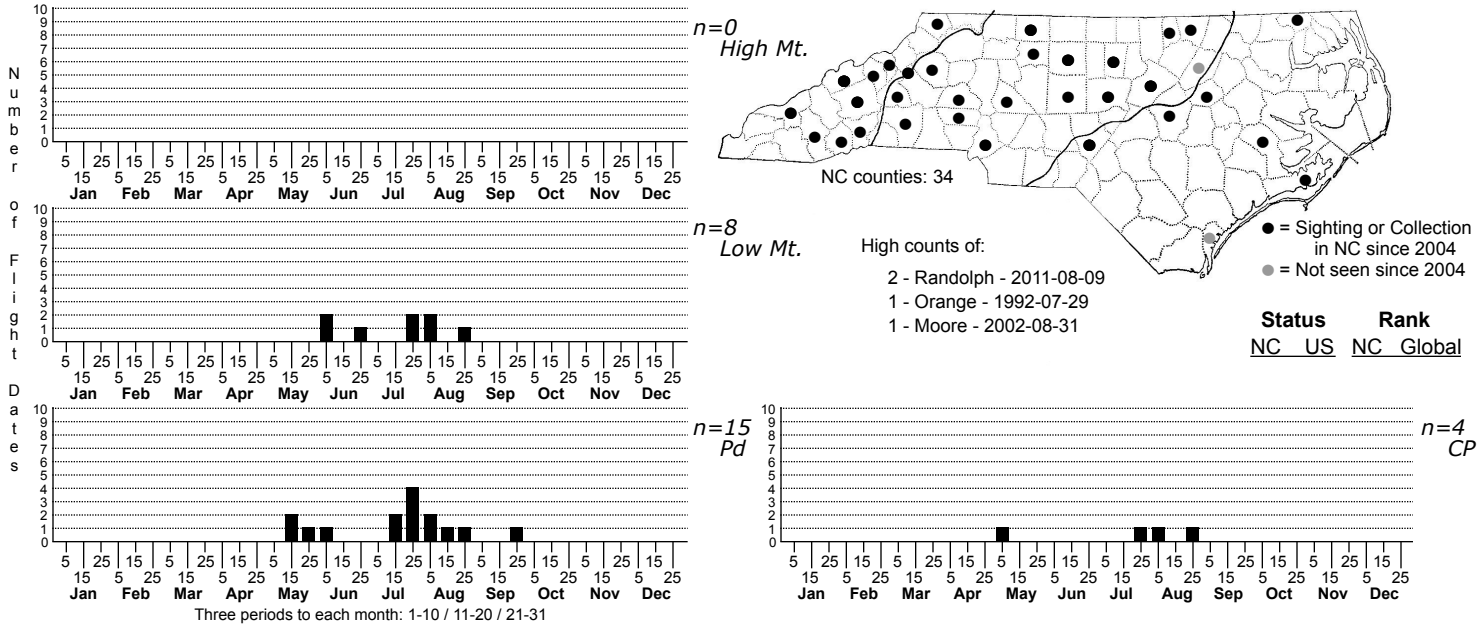
Phobetron pithecium Hag [Monkey Slug] Moth



FAMILY: Limacodidae SUBFAMILY: TRIBE:
TAXONOMIC_COMMENTS: Phobetron pithecium is one of two members of the genus that occur in North America and the only one that occurs in the eastern U.S.

FIELD GUIDE DESCRIPTIONS: Covell (1984); Beadle and Leckie (2012)
ONLINE PHOTOS:
TECHNICAL DESCRIPTION, ADULTS: Forbes (1923)
TECHNICAL DESCRIPTION, IMMATURE STAGES: Dyars (1896); Wagner (2005)

ID COMMENTS: The females have a dark brown to brownish-yellow thorax, abdomen, and legs, with shiny black forewings that bear a band of cream-edged, gray or brown semi-translucent ovals running through the median area, and similar markings between the median area and the base. In fresh condition there is a pair of thin, iridescent, silvery-blue, sub-terminal lines which stand out against the dark forewings. These pale blue scales are also scattered across the rest of the forewings and thorax. Males are similar in appearance but have slightly narrower and more attenuated forewings which are more extensively translucent. Both sexes possess an obvious and distinctive white or cream-colored tuft on the tibia of the middle legs. In worn condition, identification of this species is more challenging as it can look like any number of small, dark moths, such as Thyridopteryx ephemeraeformis, although that species is larger, its body shape is longer, and it has completely clear wings. The length from the tip of head to the apex of the forewing at rest averages 13 mm (n = 3).

DISTRIBUTION: Phobetron pithecium is found throughout most of the eastern US and in adjacent areas of southern Canada (Ontario; Quebec). In the US the range extends from Maine to southern Florida, and westward to central Texas, central Oklahoma, eastern Kansas, Iowa and Minnesota. This species occurs essentially statewide in North Carolina, but is uncommon in the Coastal Plain and apparently absent from the highest elevations in the Blue Ridge.

FLIGHT COMMENT: The adults have been observed from March through November in the southernmost areas of the range such as Florida, and primarily from May through September elsewhere. Local populations typically have one brood per year in northern populations and probably two in southern populations (Wagner 2005, Murphy et al. 2011). Most populations in North Carolina appear to be univoltine. As of 2023, our records extend from mid-May through late September.

HABITAT: Most of our records come from forested habitats that vary from mesic to xeric. These include fairly dry upland deciduous forests, lakeshores, mesic cove forests, and xeric Sandhill communities with intermixed hardwoods along streams and seeps.

FOOD: The larvae are broadly polyphagous and feed on deciduous trees and shrubs (Dyars, 1896; Wagner, 2005; Heppner, 2007; Robinson et al., 2010; Murphy et al., 2011; Marquis et al., 2019). The reported hosts include Sugar Maple (Acer saccharum), Canadian Serviceberry (Amelanchier canadensis), River Birch (Betula nigra) and other birches, hickories (Carya), chestnuts (Castanea), bittersweet (Celastrus), Buttonbush (Cephalanthus occidentalis), Citrus, dogwoods (Cornus), hazelnuts (Corylus), American Persimmon (Diospyros virginiana), American Beech (Fagus grandifolia), Carolina Ash (Fraxinus caroliniana) and other ashes, Loblolly Bay (Gordonia lasianthus), American Witch-hazel (Hamamelis virginiana), American Holly (Ilex opaca), Black Walnut (Juglans nigra), cultivated apples (Malus domestica), Common Waxmyrtle (Morella cerifera), Quaking Aspen (Populus tremuloides), Choke Cherry (Prunus virginiana), pears (Pyrus), White Oak (Quercus alba), Scarlet Oak (Q. coccinea), Shumard Oak (Q. shumardii), Black Oak (Q. velutina), Live Oak (Q. virginiana), brambles (Rubus), roses (Rosa), willows (Salix), Sassafras (Sassafras albidum), basswoods (Tilia) and Chinese Elm (Ulmus parvifolia).

OBSERVATION_METHODS: The adults come to lights, but appears to be seen more often at sheets than in UV-light traps. Like other limacodid, this species does not come to bait or visit flowers.

NATURAL HERITAGE PROGRAM RANKS: G4 [S4]

STATE PROTECTION: Has no legal protection, although permits are required to collect it in state parks and on other public lands.

COMMENTS: Given the broad distribution of its many food plants, we would assume this species would be more commonly encountered than it seems to be in the state. Perhaps its attraction to lights is merely modest, since there are many county records that are based on observations of the larvae. Females are more likely to be encountered at lights than males.