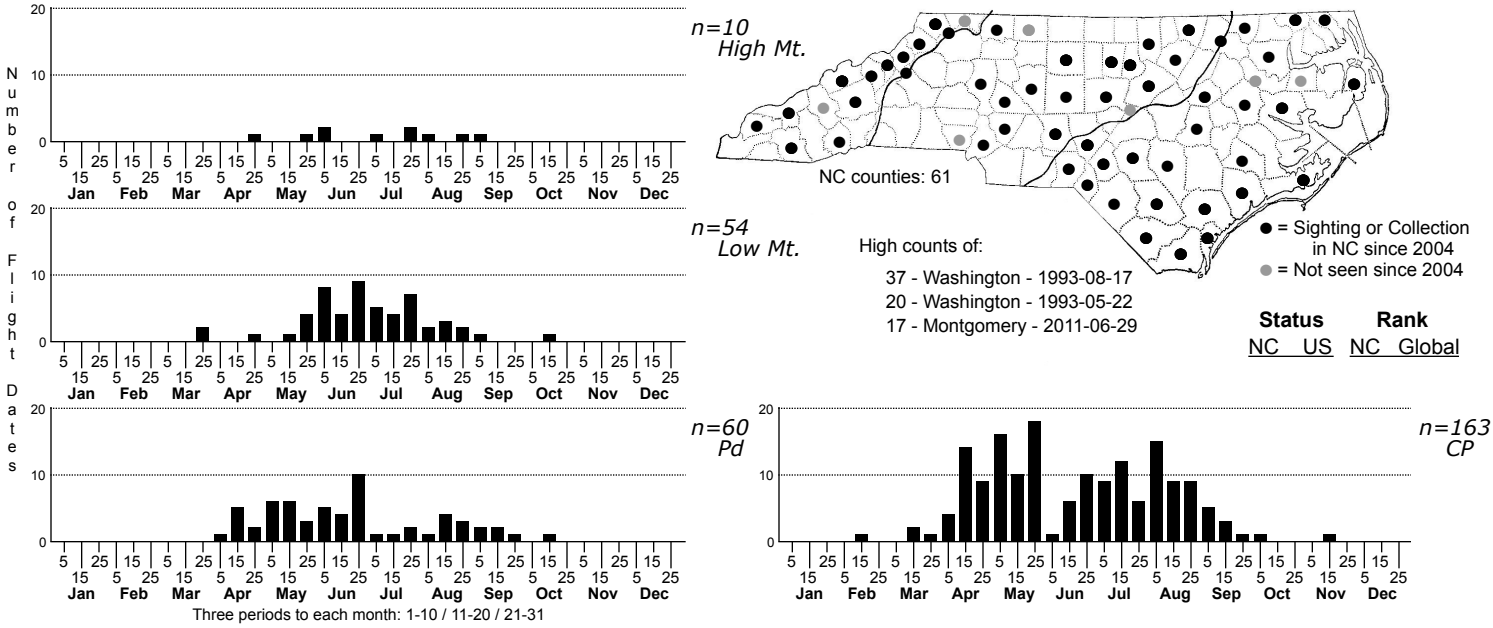
Spilosoma virginica Virginian Tiger Moth



FAMILY: Erebidae SUBFAMILY: Arctiinae TRIBE: Arctiini
TAXONOMIC_COMMENTS: One of eight species in this genus that occur north of Mexico and one of four species found in North Carolina

FIELD GUIDE DESCRIPTIONS: Covell (1984); Beadle and Leckie (2012)
ONLINE PHOTOS:
TECHNICAL DESCRIPTION, ADULTS: Forbes (1960)
TECHNICAL DESCRIPTION, IMMATURE STAGES: Forbes (1960); Wagner (2005)

ID COMMENTS: This species has nearly all white wings, with usually just a few small black dots on the forewing (often just a dot at the lower angle of the cell) and just one or two spots on the hindwing (Forbes, 1960). Spilosoma virginica can be distinguished from S. latipennis by the yellow rather than pink hair on the fore-legs and by a pattern of yellow patches and black spots on the upperside of the abdomen. The abdominal pattern also distinguishes S. virginica from S. congrua and Hyphantria cunea, both of which have pure white abdomens and are often much more heavily spotted. Spilosoma dubia is much more heavily marked on the forewings with black spots, but has a similar pattern of yellow and black patches on the abdomen, although usually more obscured by a layer of longer white hair. Estigmene acrea, another white tiger moth with black spots on its forewings, is much bigger, longer-winged, and usually more heavily spotted than S. virginica.

DISTRIBUTION: Probably occurs statewide

FLIGHT COMMENT: Appears to be present throughout most of the growing season, with two or three peaks in activity in the Piedmont and Coastal Plain

HABITAT: Wagner (2005) lists fields, gardens, bottomlands, woodlands, and forests as habitats used by this species. In North Carolina, it occurs in a wide variety of open and forested habitats, including dune grasslands and maritime forests on the barrier islands; Longleaf Pine savannas, flatwoods, and sandhills; peatlands; floodplains; and mesic- to dry-hardwood forests.

FOOD: Polyphagous, like other members of this genus, feeding on a wide range of herbaceous and woody plants (Forbes, 1960; Wagner, 2005). As of 2024, we have feeding records for White Sweetclover (Melilotus albus), a beggartick (Bidens sp.), a joe-pye-weed (Eutrochium sp.), a wild petunia (Ruellia sp.), a willow (Salix sp.), Wingstem (Verbesina alternifolia), Giant Ironweed (Vernonia gigantea) and a wisteria (Wisteria sp.).

OBSERVATION_METHODS: This species comes well to black lights, with up to 37 having been collected in a single trap; not recorded at bait.

NATURAL HERITAGE PROGRAM RANKS: G5 [S5]

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

COMMENTS: This is one of our most abundant and ubiquitous species, occurring in most open and wooded habitats across the state. It appears to be quite secure.