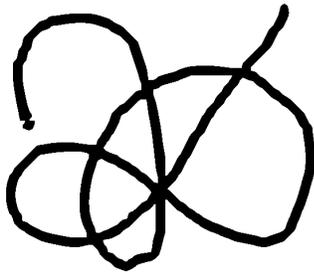


Horsehair Worms

Phillip E. Sloderbeck

Extension Specialist
Entomology, Southwest



Introduction

Almost every year several specimens of long, slender, brown worms are submitted to the entomology diagnostic laboratory for identification. Specimens are often collected from sidewalks, dog dishes, stock tanks, bathtubs, house floors, swimming pools and ponds.

Hairworms belong in the class, Nematomorpha, and were first noted in the 14th and 15th centuries. Linnaeus first used the term *Gordius* as a generic name in 1758, due to the resemblance of the worms to the knot tied by Gordius, King of Phrygia. They are often called "horsehair worms" due to their resemblance to horse hairs and their occurrence in horse-watering troughs.

Description

Adult hairworms are from 4 to 24 inches long and a tenth of an inch or less in

diameter. They range in color from yellowish gray to light amber to dark brown. Both ends are bluntly rounded.

They can be visually separated from nematodes (round worms) by their color and shape. Nematodes are white in color and taper at both ends.

Life History

Adults emerge from their hosts from late summer to early fall, enter water, and become free-swimming. In the spring, males and females gather in large, tangled masses and mating occurs. Eggs are deposited from late April until early June, either in large gluey masses or in long gelatinous strings. The eggs hatch in 2 to 12 weeks and the larvae migrate to aquatic plants where they encyst and wait to be eaten by a host.

Once inside the host, they bore through the wall of the intestine and enter the hemocoel where they obtain nutrition and finish development. The larvae absorb food through their body walls. If the host is too small to allow complete development, the worm will encyst and wait for a larger

invertebrate, such as a praying mantis, to ingest the smaller insect. Adult hairworms emerge when the host insect approaches water.

Hairworms show little host specificity. They occur in a wide variety of insects in the orders Coleoptera, Demaptera, Hemiptera, Hymenoptera, Neuroptera, Orthoptera and Trichoptera. Other invertebrates such as millipedes, centipedes, spiders, leeches and some crustaceans may also serve as hosts. Horsehair worms do not pose a threat to humans or domestic animals.

Control

Since the worms pose no serious health problems, controls consist of filtering water to remove the worms.

Adapted from: Esser, R. P., 1980. Nematomorpha. Nematology Circular No. 70. Florida Department of Agriculture

Entomology 313 (L.D.*)

December 1995

* L.D. - A Limited Distribution Publication
Not available from Distribution Center



COOPERATIVE EXTENSION SERVICE, KANSAS STATE UNIVERSITY, MANHATTAN

KSU, County Extension Councils, Extension Districts, and U.S. Department of Agriculture Cooperating. All educational programs and materials available without discrimination on the basis of race, color, national origin, sex, age, or disability.