

Palm LeafSkeletonizer

Homaledra sabalella (Chambers)

The palm leafskeletonizer is a recent invader in southern California. This insect damages palms by feeding on the leaves. The feeding damage first appears as dark brown splotches on the leaf and continues until the leaf dries up and dies. Only in rare cases will this feeding damage result in the death of the palm.

This insect feeds exclusively on palms, both native and introduced. It has been found feeding on butia palm, coconut palm, latania palm, true date palm, Canary Island date palm, Senegal date palm, queen palm, Washingtonian palm, fishtail palm, saw-palmetto, cabbage palmetto, and dwarf palmetto.

Adult palm leafskeletonizers are small moths (about $\frac{1}{4}$ inch long with a wingspan of $\frac{5}{8}$ inch) that are active mostly at night. The female moths lay eggs on newly developing palm fronds. Upon hatching, a newly emerged larva will feed on the palm leaf immediately beneath the egg. When the leaf tissue immediately beneath the egg is consumed, the larva spins a silk web over fresh leaf tissue and continues to feed under the webbing. Colonies of palm leafskeletonizer larvae may be comprised of small groups of larvae feeding on a leaflet. On one frond, there may be 35-100 individuals. When the larvae complete their development, they form pupae beneath the webbing. After the appropriate amount of time, the adult moths will emerge from pupae, and the cycle begins again.



Feeding damage on Phoenix palm. (Photo by R. Garrison)



Larval damage on palm frond. (Photo by D. Kellum)



Mature palm leafskeletonizer larva. (Photo by D. Kellum)



Adult. (Photo by R. Garrison)

If you have palms with damage symptoms that looks like palm leafskeletonizer damage, please contact your County Agricultural Commissioner's Office. Their phone number can be found in the County Government section of your phone book. Personnel from the County Agricultural Commissioner's Office can verify that the damaged palm has palm leafskeletonizer.

Infestations of palm leafskeletonizer can be managed by pruning out the infested palm leaves. The infested palm leaves should then be secured in plastic trash bags and sent to the landfill for burial. It is important to bag the infested palm leaves rather than adding them to a compost pile because any palm leafskeletonizer that is within a few days of becoming an adult will emerge from the pruned leaves. The adults will then infest nearby palms. Where permissible, the infested leaves may be burned in order to kill this insect.

