

# Woolly bears and Tiger Moths

## Part I

### by LloydEighme

Common names have led to some confusion in this group of moths and caterpillars in the family Arctiidae. We have five kinds of moths from this family in the Skagit County collection and we can add more if you will find them and bring them in. Then we will help you straighten out the confusion, so you can tell people correctly what they are, what they eat, and what to do about them.

The most commonly seen woolly bear caterpillar is the black one with orange in the middle. The fully grown caterpillars are often seen wandering in the yard and garden. Have you ever seen a small one that is still feeding and growing? They hatch from a tiny egg and grow by molting several times as they grow larger during the summer. They are not often seen until fully grown because they are small and hidden and they feed mostly on weeds which is of no concern to gardeners. Have you ever seen one feeding on the plants in your garden? They are called general feeders because they will eat almost any green plant including grasses and stinging nettles. The mature caterpillars are wandering around looking for a protected spot to make their cocoon and survive the winter. Those that do survive emerge as adult moths in the spring. You may see them around the porch light at night. They are not as colorful as the caterpillars. See picture.

The yellow woollybear caterpillar does not look at all like its black and orange cousin. It is "fuzzier" and of one solid color. Individuals may vary from light cream color to orange-yellow, but most are yellow and they are all of the same species. They are also general feeders, but are seen more frequently in the vegetable garden. They are fond of the leaves of green beans and may even feed on the leaves of fruit trees. They are not usually abundant and may be tolerated or simply picked off and destroyed. The adult yellow woolly bear moth also flies to lights at night and may be seen perched on the wall around the porch lights when the sun comes up in the morning. It is not yellow like its caterpillar, but rather snowy white with a few small black spots on the wings and some dark spots on the body. The underside of the head may have some orange color as if it has been drinking orange juice and did not clean its face.

You may wish to look up more information about these woolly bears and you may have trouble with common names. The black and orange one is correctly called the black banded woolly bear (as listed in the book of official common names accepted by the Entomological Society of America), but it is also known by many common names including Isabella tiger moth. The yellow woolly bear (accepted common name) is also called the Virginia tiger moth because it was first described from a specimen collected in Virginia and given the species name virginica. The genus names have been changed several times. The yellow woolly bear was (Diacrisia virginica but now it is Spilomena virginica. The banded woolly bear was Isia isabella, but now it is Pyrrharctia isabella. So if you are looking in an old book and do not find a common name you recognize, you may have to look under the old genus names to find what you are looking for. Does that leave you thoroughly confused? Yes, so am I! Just like peoples names have been

changed and altered, so have insect names and we will do our best to help you get them straightened out.

You can look at the woolly bear moths in the Skagit County collection. However, the caterpillars are very difficult to preserve, so you will find very few of them in the collection. This is where good pictures become very useful.



Black Banded Woolly Bear Caterpillar



Black Banded Woolly Bear Moth



Yellow Woolly Bear Caterpillar



Yellow Woolly Bear Moth