

Lubber Grasshoppers

Subfamily Romaleinae

This group is sometimes considered to be a separate family, Romaleidae. It differs from the other subfamilies in having a spine at the tip of the hind tibiae. Lubber grasshoppers bear a spine ventrally between the front legs, as is found in spurthroated grasshoppers, subfamily Cyrtacanthacridinae. Lubber grasshoppers are large, colorful, and usually bear short wings. The shape of the head, though variable, is usually broadly rounded. The hind femora are enlarged. When disturbed, lubber grasshoppers may hiss and spread their wings. Both the front wings and hind wings are brightly colored. Only a few species occur in North America, although many are known from South America.

Only one species is known from the eastern United States:

Romalea

***R. microptera* (Beauvois)**



Eastern lubber grasshopper (female)

***Romalea microptera* (Beauvois)**

Eastern lubber grasshopper

Identification. This species is also sometimes known as *Romalea guttata* (Houttuyn). Despite the confusion in the scientific literature concerning the correct name, Floridians have little trouble recognizing this insect. It is undoubtedly the best-known species of grasshopper in Florida, and one of the most readily recognized insects.

The nymphs are mostly black with a narrow median yellow stripe, and red on the head and front legs. Their color pattern is distinctly different from the adult stage, so they commonly are mistaken for a different species. Young tend to be gregarious and dispersive. This commonly brings them into contact with people and gardens, accounting for their familiarity. On occasion they are abundant enough to damage citrus or vegetables. They commonly seek out and defoliate amaryllis and related plants in flower gardens.

Adults are colorful, but the color pattern varies within the state. In northern Florida, southern lubber is mostly black but well marked with yellow. The lubbers in southern Florida, however, are mostly yellow but bear red and black markings and red on the forewings. Intermediate forms also exist. Adults have small wings measuring no more than two-thirds the length of the abdomen, and are flightless. They attain a large size, males measuring 43–55 mm in length and females measuring 50–70 mm.

Distribution and Ecology. Eastern lubber grasshopper is found throughout the state, and is also common in other southeastern states. There is but a single generation annually, but either nymphs or adults are present throughout most of the year in the southern portions of Florida, and all except the coldest months in northern Florida. Both sexes stridulate by rubbing the forewing against the hind wing. When alarmed, lubbers spread their wings, hiss, and secrete foul-smelling froth from their spiracles. Lubbers prefer to inhabit low, moist areas of dense undergrowth including wet hammocks with moderately dense overstory, but as they mature they disperse widely and can be found in nearly all habitats.

Eastern lubber grasshopper has a broad host range. It eats at least 26 species from 15 plant families containing shrubs, herbs, broadleaf weeds and grasses. It is reported to display preference for pokeweed, *Phytolaca americana*; tread-softly, *Cnidocolus stimulosus*; pickereel weed, *Pontederia cordata*; lizard's tail, *Saururus* sp.; sedge, *Cyperus*; and arrowhead, *Sagittaria* spp. Though the preferred habitat seems to be low, wet areas in pastures and woods and along ditches, lubbers disperse long distances during the nymphal period. They are gregarious and flightless, their migrations sometimes bringing large numbers into contact with crops where they damage vegetables, fruit trees and ornamental plants. Thus, despite an apparent preference for moist areas, they can be found in nearly all habitats.