

**WANTED**  
**ALIVE IN YOUR GARDEN**  
 Gray Hairstreak Caterpillar

By Casey Laine

**Known Food Preferences:** Master generalists when it comes to chowing down, Gray Hairstreak caterpillars have been found on plants in more than 20 different families. Female adults



lay a single, light-green egg on the flower or bud of a caterpillar food plant—most often on legumes such as peas, beans, and clovers, as well as cotton and other plants in the Mallow Family. Caterpillars may be found March through October on flowers and buds (though later instars may also feed on leaves).

**Aliases:** Gray Hairstreak caterpillars are also called Cotton Square Borers because of the damage they sometimes cause to crops.

**Known disguises:** Common and widespread, Gray Hairstreaks are most often seen in disturbed areas, ranging from the northern regions of South America up to the southern regions of Canada. Their slug-like caterpillars have small heads on short, wide, flattened bodies that are covered in long hairs (setae). The body color itself is extremely variable, with cream, bright green, pink, red, and brown forms, but all display a cream stripe on both sides. Paler oblique dorsal markings (chevrons) sometimes occur, varying in prominence from bold to obscure.

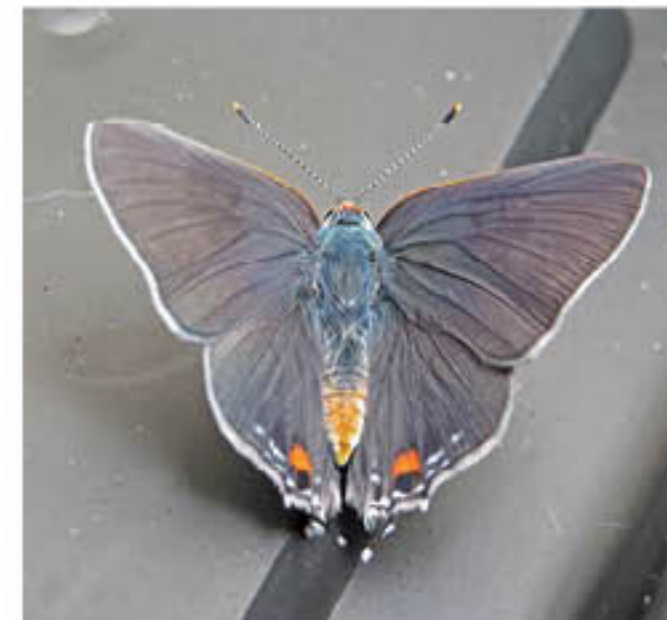
**Special Weaponry:** Aside from their color variations, which provide excellent camouflage among the buds, blooms, and leaves of their food plants, Gray Hairstreak caterpillars are sometimes guarded by ants (an association called myrmecophily—literally, “ant-love”). Ants may protect the caterpillars from predators and parasites in exchange for the collection of “honeydew,” a sugary solution secreted from special glands, called nectary organs, in the caterpillars’ abdominal regions.

**Winter hide-out:** Gray Hairstreaks produce multiple broods per season, from two (northern regions) to five (southern regions). Late-season caterpillars move away from their feeding site to pupate, concealing themselves under bark or leaf litter to form a short, rounded, hairy chrysalis that is usually brown. There they will remain dormant till spring.



**If capture is avoided:** The following year, adult Gray Hairstreaks emerge to begin their breeding cycle. You may see them feeding among flowers, or find males waiting among shrubs and small trees for a receptive female. They may perch with wings upright and closed, moving their hindwings up and down, or bask with wings open (one of the few hairstreaks that do), creating a false-head illusion with their threadlike tails (which resemble antennae) and their bright orange “eyes.” These features draw a predator’s attention away from their vulnerable heads and bodies.

**Reward offered:** Despite the “gray” in its common name, there is nothing bland about this member of the Gossamer Wing Family. As a caterpillar, it often presents in vibrant floral colors. As an adult, it offers a striking sight to observers: the beautiful pearly-gray underside of its wings is slashed with black and spotted with orange for a dashing contrast, while the upper wings shimmer with unexpected metallics. It seems like a misnomer to call this gem something so ordinary as gray, when it would clearly have been more apt to call it silver. But by any name, it is a treasure in the garden.



Casey Laine comes from a long line of talkative women. She works as an editor, and publishes an annual anthology of fiction and poetry. In her spare time, she chases butterflies with her camera.