

Gypsy Moth Caterpillars Are Hatching, What You Can Do to Protect Your Woodlands

Eau Claire, Wis. – A naturalist trying to breed more hardy silkworms accidentally introduced the gypsy moth into Massachusetts in 1869. Since then, this pest has been munching its way west across North America and into Wisconsin. The moth moves through natural spread and also hitches rides on objects such as firewood, timber, camping equipment, vehicles, and lawn furniture.

Gypsy moths are native to Europe, Asia and North Africa and their favorite food is oak leaves. They also feed on over 500 tree and shrub species, including aspen, birch, crabapple, tamarack and willow. When the caterpillar populations are high, they can completely defoliate a woodlot or neighborhood, stressing and killing trees and making outdoor recreation nearly impossible.

The DNR trap catches from summer 2005 show a number of hot spots throughout Adams Co., with the highest trap catches (over 700 males/ trap) caught in the northeast part of the county, and this corresponds to the number of complaints received too (lots from the Lake Camelot area)

In late summer each female moth lays a tan-colored egg mass about the size of a quarter. These egg masses feel look and feel like felt and contain up to 1,000 shiny metallic-looking eggs. The eggs overwinter sheltered in these egg masses, and between late April and mid-May each year a new generation of gypsy moth caterpillars hatches.

"Egg masses can be found in any protected area, including the undersides of tree branches, in bark crevices, on road signs, in bird houses; even in sheltered areas of buildings and vehicles," says Bria Radtke, the DNR's Gypsy Moth Coordinator in Eau Claire.

Before the eggs hatch in late April through mid-May, they can be killed by spraying them with an egg mass oil available at many garden stores, nurseries, and hardware stores. Egg masses can also be scraped into a can and drowned in soapy water, thrown into the garbage, microwaved or flushed down the toilet. Eggs should not be left on the ground, as they will still hatch. "Treating egg masses is one of the best ways to help reduce the gypsy moth population, since you will have 500 to 1,000 fewer caterpillars for every egg mass you oil or remove," said Radtke.

Before the first caterpillars hatch, homeowners can help to protect their trees by creating a sticky barrier that prevents migrating caterpillars from crawling up a tree. To do this, wrap duct tape around a tree several times with the sticky side down. Press the tape into bark crevices and then smear a sticky substance such as "Tanglefoot" on top of the tape.

Within a few weeks of hatching gypsy moth caterpillars will be about 1" long. At this point, they will begin a daily migration down the tree in order to hide from predators. Homeowners can take advantage of this behavior by giving them a band of burlap to hide under and then destroying them. In early June, cut a piece of burlap 18" to 24" wide and long enough to wrap completely around the tree at chest height. Tie a piece of string around the middle of the burlap and fold the upper portion down to form a "skirt" around the tree. Every afternoon, check under the burlap and either cut the caterpillars in half or brush them into a bucket of soapy water to kill them. Wear gloves when handling the caterpillars to avoid skin irritation. "Make sure you check your burlap bands and remove the caterpillars every day," warns Radtke, "or you're just providing a safe hiding place from predators for the caterpillars".

When very large numbers of caterpillars are present, homeowners may choose to spray their trees with an insecticide before the caterpillars can eat the leaves. Bt, a microbial insecticide, must be applied while the caterpillars are less than 1/2" long. Chemical pesticides may be applied at any time caterpillars are present. Be sure to follow the instructions found on the insecticide container. Most pesticides should be applied at regular intervals while the caterpillars are present. "If you spray, do it while the caterpillars are small so they don't get big enough to defoliate the tree or become a major nuisance," says Radtke. A healthy, well-watered tree will usually survive at least two years of defoliation. When landowners encounter the pupae or white female moths that can't fly, they can be crushed with a stick.

Information on gypsy moth management and maps of proposed aerial spray areas are available by visiting www.gypsymoth.wi.gov. Homeowners seeking assistance can also call the gypsy moth hotline, 1-800-642-MOTH.



