

Spring Caterpillars on School Grounds

This is the time of year when web-making caterpillars may be appearing on schools grounds. The most common species is the **Eastern tent caterpillar**, a relatively harmless nuisance that can easily be managed by pruning out infested branches or ignored altogether. However, another species, the **browntail moth** can cause a severe rash. Browntail moth occurs mostly in coastal areas, but can hitchhike on vehicles to start infestations at inland locations too.

Last week, a **browntail moth** infestation was found by school staff at Gardiner High School. Although initially they thought it was the harmless tent caterpillar, the school nurse, Barbara Chisholm, suspected browntail moth when students with rashes visited her office. She contacted RSU 11 IPM Coordinator, Jon Stonier who inspected the school yard and found large numbers of hairy caterpillars feeding on ornamental crabapple trees and crawling on the exterior walls of the school building. Access to the area was then restricted with warning tape and signage. The team contacted the Maine Forest Service for help in identifying the caterpillars. After consulting with MFS and learning as much as they could about this pest, they decided the best course of action was to hire a pest management service to make a targeted pesticide application to mitigate this medically important pest problem. Notices were sent to parents and staff five days in advance and signs were posted two days in advance of the application which was made during early morning hours, well before students and staff arrived. This winter Jon will watch for and prune out any nests of overwintering caterpillars remaining on the shrubs and trees. Winter nest removal is highly effective in eliminating browntail moth infestations.

Browntail Moth & Eastern Tent Comparison

Webs on Ends of Branches



Browntail Moth Web

Webs at Branch Junctions



Eastern Tent Caterpillar Web

Browntail Moth Larva



- ❖ Brown & hairy
- ❖ 2 Orange dots (arrow)
- ❖ 2 White stripes

Eastern Tent Caterpillar Larva



- ❖ Dark & hairy (brown & blue)
- ❖ White stripe down center
- ❖ Paired spots on sides (like peacock feather eye-spot)

CAUTION: Browntail moth is an introduced caterpillar that causes a rash in most people. Sensitive individuals can have severe reactions to the caterpillars' hairs. Learn more at: www.maine.gov/forestpests#btm

RELAX: Eastern tent caterpillar is a native insect. It eats apples and cherries and their relatives. It does little harm in the forest, but can be a nuisance in yards and a pest in orchards. Learn more at: www.gotpests.org

Maine Forest Service

This is an excellent example of IPM in action. School staff worked together to get expert help in accurately identifying the pest, assess the risks, make informed decisions, communicate with the entire school community, and develop a plan for monitoring and early detection to prevent recurrence. This experience also highlights the importance of accurate pest identification. Specimens or good digital photos can be sent for identification to your local Extension office (see <http://extension.umaine.edu/county-offices/>), to the UM Pest Management Office (see <http://extension.umaine.edu/ipm/>) or to the Maine School IPM Program (schoolipm@maine.gov, 207-215-4793).

A list of recommended precautions is available at http://maine.gov/dacf/mfs/forest_health/insects/browntail_moth_precautions.htm

For information about the browntail moth caterpillar: http://maine.gov/dacf/mfs/forest_health/invasive_threats/index.htm#btm

For more information about Maine's school IPM requirements and pest management guidelines: <http://www.maine.gov/schoolipm>