SPONGY MOTHS IN 2022

"Spongy moth" is the new name for the insect that we've always known as "gypsy moth." The name was officially changed this year by the Entomological Society of America to do away with the pejorative term for the Romani people. "Spongy" refers to the appearance of the porous, fluffy, egg masses that the female moths deposit on trees in the summer.

The spongy moth is a non-native species that arrived in the US from France in the late 1800s. In ordinary years it is present in numbers low enough to be hardly noticed by us, but the local population explodes when certain environmental factors coincide. The voracious larvae (caterpillars) can strip large trees nearly bare, turning whole forests from green to brown in a few weeks. The caterpillars favor oak leaves, but will also consume leaves of many other hardwood trees and shrubs, and even white pine.

After the big infestations of spongy moths in Hillsdale last summer, and the deposition of egg masses by the gazillions on our lawn trees and forest trees, we expect an even larger outbreak this year.

Spongy moth (*Lymantria dispar*) larva.
Photo by Karla Salp, bugwood.org

In late April and early May you may witness the larvae emerging by the hundreds from each egg mass as tiny, black, hairy caterpillars. Each larva then spins a silken thread that allows it to be windblown to nearby trees, and this "ballooning" enables the larvae to infest large areas. For the next few weeks after emergence they will munch through leaves and grow to 2-2.5 inches long. Along the way they will develop pairs of blue bumps and red bumps along their back, making them easy to identify. By late June, they cease eating and enter the pupal stage of their life cycle. The dark brown pupa cases are visible on tree trunks in June, and the adult moths emerge in July and mate. The female moths then deposit their buff-colored egg masses on trees, and both the males and females soon die. The egg masses remain on th caterpillars will emerge in spring 2023.

What can you do to protect your trees? For your forest trees—nothing. Most will survive, even those that seem to be completely defoliated, and many will put out new leaves later in the summer. The defoliation can weaken the trees, however, and make them more vulnerable to the effects of drought, heat, and diseases. When the moth larvae are present in large numbers, they are typically attacked by a fungus and a virus—already present in our forests—which reduce the populations to harmless levels.

If you want to protect a few lawn trees, you can find instructions for "sticky bands" and "burlap barriers" online. Note that sticky bands can be hazardous to other animals—even birds—so check the bands frequently and remove if necessary. If the tree is small enough, you can remove the larvae by hand, using a ladder to get to higher parts of the trunk and branches. If your lawn trees are within 100 feet or so of a forest, however, ballooning larvae are likely to thwart any of these measures, so you may need to just sit back and endure the infestation like the rest of us. If your lawn trees and your forest trees are in good health, they are likely to survive.