

Oak Processionary Moth

The Oak processionary moth lays its eggs high up on twigs and branches of Oak trees in August/ September. These clusters can contain up to 200 eggs and will remain over winter until they hatch as the weather warms in April. The caterpillars build a nest of silk webbing on the branches or trunk, starting off white in colour it is quickly discoloured by frass and shed skins and blends in with the bark.



The caterpillars leave the nest one following another head to tail in a long train hence the name processionary moth. The young feed high in the canopy during the day returning to the nest when they have stopped feeding. As the caterpillars grow, they often build another nest lower down the trunk where they are more conspicuous, it is also reported that they will often feed at night and rest up during the day as they get older.



The caterpillars will shed their skins as they grow, each moult is called an instar. There are 6 instars before they pupate (this is where they turn from caterpillar into a moth) it is during the 3rd instar or moult that they grow the hairs that can be an irritant causing rash, sore throat, fever, vomiting and dizziness. These hairs can be voluntarily shed if the caterpillar is disturbed or attacked and as the caterpillars moult, the hairs that remain in old nests with the shed skins can still cause problems several years later. In late June to early September the caterpillars will pupate before turning into moths, the pupa will be found in old nests near the base of the tree or in the turf and leaf litter around the trunk. The adults emerge as moths in late July through to September, the females tend to stay in the local area while the males can travel several kilometres in search of a mate. Once mating occurs eggs are laid on the host tree to overwinter.

The caterpillars have very long, white hairs along the back which contrast markedly with the much shorter, almost undetectable, irritating hairs. They have a grey body and dark head. Older larvae have a central dark stripe with paler lines down each side. The caterpillars themselves seldom venture away from the host tree so anything of a similar description found on fences or on garden plants are not necessarily processionary moth.



Please

- Do not touch or let children or animals touch/ approach the nests or caterpillars.
- Do not try removing nests or caterpillars yourselves.
- Try to avoid time spent in the vicinity of infested oak trees.
- Report any sightings with a photo to: trealert.forestresearch.gov.uk