

Safety Short

Beware – Browntail Moths

Why are they a problem?

The browntail caterpillar has tiny (0.15 mm) hairs that on sensitive individuals cause a skin rash similar to poison ivy and/or trouble breathing.

The microscopic hairs break off the caterpillars and are everywhere in browntail infested areas; on trees, lawns, gardens, decks, picnic tables and in the air.

The hairs can remain toxic for up to THREE YEARS. Although the problem is worst from May to July, they may cause a reaction at other times of year as well.

Wind or activities such as mowing, leaf-blowing, etc., can stir up the hairs, leading to a reaction.

The rash and trouble breathing can last anywhere from a few hours to several weeks. It is caused by both a chemical reaction to a toxin in the hairs and physical irritation from the barbed hairs. Contact your physician if a reaction is severe.



Prevention:

There is no specific treatment for browntail moth rash. Home remedies can help with symptoms. This can include a cool bath with baking soda, hydrocortisone cream, and calamine lotion. If you are having trouble breathing, swallowing, or swelling of your mouth, tongue, or throat, call 9-1-1.

Take a cool shower and change clothes after activity in areas with browntail moths to wash off any hairs.

Wear a mask, goggles, and coveralls when doing any activity that can stir up browntail moth hairs, like cutting brush or raking leaves.

Dry laundry inside during June and July to prevent browntail moth hairs from getting on clothing.

Perform work in areas of known moth infestation on wet days so browntail moth hairs do not get stirred up.

Life Cycle: Browntail moth (*Euproctis Chrysorrhea*)

One generation a year.

Four life stages; egg, larval, pupal, and adult.

Larval stage (caterpillars) lasts from August through to the following June.

The caterpillars become active and leave their over-wintering webs to feed on tender new leaves in the spring. They may devour the leaves as fast as the leaves develop. When young, the caterpillars return to the webs at night, but will remain out on the leaves overnight as they mature. They are fully grown by late June. The caterpillars then form filmy cocoons between leaves on trees, under eaves, picnic tables, decks, etc.

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Adult moths emerge from cocoons in late July and August, laying clusters of eggs on the underside of leaves. The moths are strongly attracted to light. Caterpillars emerge from the eggs in August and feed on the upper side of the leaves of host trees. In the fall, colonies of caterpillars build winter webs on the tips of branches. The webs are made from leaves tightly wrapped with white silk. There can be 25 to 400 or more caterpillars in each web. The caterpillars overwinter within the 2-5 inch (5-10 cm) winter webs. The webs are found most often on red oak or apple trees.

Identification:

Browntail Caterpillar: Can find great pictures at <https://www.forestryimages.org/index.cfm>

Dark brown with a broken white stripe on each side and two conspicuous red spots on the back. They grow to 1.5 inches (3.8 cm) in length. Seen in July and August. Both sexes of the browntail moth have snow white wings and a tuft of dark brown hair on the tip of the abdomen.

Look-a-likes: Eastern tent caterpillars have a solid whitish line down the middle of the back with a row of oval pale blue spots on each side and are covered with long brown hairs.

Gypsy moth caterpillars have pairs of blue and red spots along their back and are covered with long brown hairs.

Damage:

The caterpillars feed on the leaves of many hardwood trees and shrubs. Common host trees and shrubs include: Oak, apple, crabapple, cherry, hawthorn, shad-bush, serviceberry, and rugosa rose. Feeding by browntail caterpillars can cause reduced growth and branch dieback. A number of years at high population levels can lead to mortality of trees and shrubs.

For More Information, Visit:

1. www.maine.gov/dhhs/browntailmoth (Including frequently asked questions)
2. www.maine.gov/dacf/mfs/forest_health/invasive_threats/browntail_moth_info.htm (Includes browntail moth risk map)

You can also contact 211 Maine by dialing 211, texting your zip code to 898-211, or emailing info@211maine.org for more information.

