

Spongy Moth (formerly gypsy moth)



Figure 1. A spongy moth egg mass. Note the tiny dark caterpillars that are hatching from this egg mass. (USDA Forest Service Archive, USDA Forest Service, www.Bugwood.org)



Figure 2. A fully grown spongy moth caterpillar. Note the 5 pairs of blue spots and 6 pairs of red spots on the back. (USDA Forest Service Archive, USDA Forest Service, www.Bugwood.org)

Injury: The spongy (*Lymantria dispar*) is one of the most important forest pests in the Northeast. The caterpillar feeds on leaves of forest, shade, ornamental and fruit trees, and shrubs. A single defoliation can kill some evergreens, but usually two or more defoliations are needed to kill hardwoods.

Egg masses: The egg masses (**Fig.1**) are 1 1/2 inch long by 3/4 inch wide (38 x 19 mm), covered with a dense mat of buff colored hairs. They are often found on trunks of trees or underside of larger branches. Current year egg masses have a good buff tan color and are hard and velvety to the touch; older ones are faded, and soft to the touch as the eggs have hatched.

Larvae (caterpillars): Small larvae are dark brown to black and very hairy. As they reach maturity they become slate colored and have 2 rows of blue spots (5 pairs) followed by 6 pairs of red spots on the back (**Fig. 2**). Fully-grown larvae are 2 to 2 1/4 inches (50-56 mm) in length.

Pupae: Pupae are brown and teardrop shaped (**Fig.3**). A few threads of brown silk hold the pupae in place on the tree trunk.

Adults: (**Fig.4**) Male moths are brownish with black markings and have a wingspan of 1 to 1 1/4 inches. Females have white wings with dark markings and a tan to buff colored body. Females are heavy bodied and do not fly.

Life History: There are four distinct stages to the development of the spongy moth -- egg, larva, pupa and adult (moth). The eggs are round, black to brown in color, and deposited in masses of 100 to 600 eggs in July and August. The tiny caterpillar overwinters inside the eggshell, but does not hatch until the following April or May. When the eggs hatch, the 1/4 inch (6-8 mm) long caterpillars remain on the egg mass for a few days before climbing to the tree to feed.

The young caterpillars also spin silken threads and hang down from the tree branches. Wind often breaks the threads and carries the caterpillars to nearby trees and shrubs. This is called "ballooning." Long range

dispersal is aided by man -- egg masses or pupae may be inadvertently carried on vehicles, outdoor furniture, plants and the like.

The female passes through 6 caterpillar growth stages; the male, 5 stages. Each time the larva grows it sheds its skin and a new larger skin forms. The larval stage lasts for about 7 weeks.

In June and early July, full-grown larvae may leave the host plant and seek out protected places to form the pupa or resting stage. At this time, the large caterpillars may be seen crawling across walkways or roads, or up the side of a house. The pupal stage lasts about two weeks.

Moths emerge from the pupae – the males usually emerge first. Males are strong fliers and may be seen flying in a zigzag pattern during the daytime. The female does not fly, but remains near the pupation site and releases a sex attractant (pheromone) which attracts males. After mating she deposits her eggs in a single mass and then dies. There is one generation per year.



Figure 3. Spongy moth pupae. (James A. Copony, Virginia Department of Forestry, www.Bugwood.org)



Fig. 4. Adult spongy moths (*the white female moth is on the left and the darker male is on the right*) (USDA APHIS PPQ Archive, USDA APHIS PPQ, www.Bugwood.org)

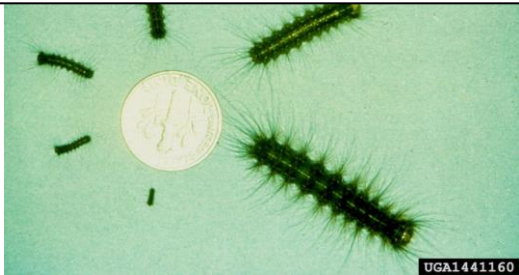


Figure 5. A comparison of spongy moth caterpillar instar sizes in relation of a nickel. (USDA Forest Service - Rocky Mountain Region Archive, USDA Forest Service, www.Bugwood.org)

Management: Before mid-April, look for overwintering egg masses on tree trunks, rock outcroppings, fences, sides of buildings and woodpiles. Scrape off the fuzzy buff colored egg masses into a container, and destroy them.

Young caterpillars may be controlled by spraying. The homeowner can spray small trees and shrubs, but larger trees should be done by a professional arborist. READ and FOLLOW the manufacturer's instructions when using any pesticides. On Long Island applications should be made in late-April through early June (maybe one to two weeks later on the north and south forks of Long Island) (90-448 GDD). Contact your local Cooperative Extension for specific pesticide recommendations. Commercial applicators should refer to the current *Pest Management Guidelines for Commercial Production and Maintenance of Trees and Shrubs*. For information on utilizing GDD contact Cornell Cooperative Extension – Suffolk County or visit the CCE web site [Using Growing Degree Days for Pest Management](http://www.cce.suffolk.edu/UsingGrowingDegreeDaysforPestManagement/).

Older caterpillars can be controlled to a degree by banding the trees. The older larvae move up the trees in the evening to feed and back down at dawn to seek shelter during the day.

- A burlap strip 12-18 inches wide can be cut and tied around the trunk with twine. Fold the top half of the band down and over the lower half to provide a sheltered area for the caterpillars to hide under during the day. Collect and destroy caterpillars daily.
- A 6-12 inch band of nonporous material can also be wrapped around the trunk and smeared with a sticky substance such as Tanglefoot (available at many garden supply centers.) The caterpillars will stick to the Tanglefoot as they try to move over it. Remove caterpillars by raking the band with a comb whenever they become numerous, and destroy them.

Pupae may be crushed when found on trees or in other protected places.

It is not practical to try and control adults. The females might be collected by hand and destroyed but trapping the males or trying to catch them in flight is not effective for control in areas of high populations.

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The New York State Department of Environmental Conservation

(NYSDEC) Bureau of Pest Management maintains a web site with a searchable database for pesticide products currently registered in New York State. Individuals who have Internet access can locate currently registered products at <http://www.dec.ny.gov/nyspad/products?0>.

This publication contains pesticide recommendations. Changes in pesticide regulations occur constantly and human errors are still possible. Some materials mentioned may no longer be available and some uses may no longer be legal. All pesticides distributed, sold or applied in New York State must be registered with the New York State Department of Environmental Conservation (DEC). Questions concerning the legality and/or registration status for pesticide use in New York State should be directed to the appropriate Cornell Cooperative Extension Specialist or your regional DEC office. READ THE LABEL BEFORE APPLYING ANY PESTICIDE.

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