Gypsy Moth

Scott Reuss, UW-Extension

Nearly everyone has seen what high tent caterpillar populations can do to a forest. Imagine that happening three years in a row, over thousands of square miles. That image is not a pretty one, but has happened in many Northeastern U.S. states. The pest that caused these problems, and which has the potential to do the same in our area, is the gypsy moth.

Gypsy moths have been present in Northeastern Wisconsin/Southwestern U.P. since about 1970, but have not developed the epidemic populations that have occurred in the New England states. However, they have established their presence, causing localized problems in many counties, and could reach epidemic-range populations any time we let down our guard.

One reason they can be very damaging to our area is that their preferred tree species make up the majority of our forests. Trees that are favored (and needed for young caterpillar feeding) include: oaks, willow, apple, aspen, basswood, birch, tamarack, alder, boxelder, and witch-hazel. However, older caterpillars will also feed on maples, elms, beech, cherries, cottonwood, black walnut, pines, spruces, juniper, and hemlocks. In total, they can feed on up to 500 different tree & shrub species.

As with most serious plant pests, gypsy moths are an introduced species, originally native to Europe and Asia. They were purposely brought to Boston in 1869, and we've been trying to control them ever since.

Control is a relative term, however. There are many methods utilized to try to control them, including: Btk (*Bacillus thuringiensis* var. *kurstaki*) - a bacteria; pheromone-bait trapping; chemical pesticides; pheromone flakes as a mating disruptor; parasitic insects; and physical control of egg masses and/or caterpillars. Prevention of spread into new areas is the best possible control mechanism, and is the driving reason that essentially all of Northeastern Wisconsin and the U.P. are in a Gypsy Moth Quarantine zone. The Quarantine necessitates inspection of forest and nursery-related products before being shipped out of the zone, to prevent egg mass-contaminated plants from being transported to non-infected areas.

On a local level, physical control is probably the best control method, but is very time-consuming. Physical control has two primary components, egg mass destruction and trapping & destruction of young caterpillars. Brown County has undertaken a very active physical control program, concentrating on egg mass detection and removal/destruction. Their efforts are probably paying off, but their volunteers have spent innumerable hours working on this project.

Proper identification is key to knowing that you are dealing with a gypsy moth infestation. Although all life stages (see below) are fairly easy to identify, the caterpillar is the most diagnostic. However, many people confuse gypsy moths and tent caterpillars. There are two keys: 1. Gypsy moth caterpillars are found from mid-May to July, but do not build webs. 2. Older gypsy moth caterpillars have five pair of blue and six pair of red raised dots on their backs. (Note the differences in shade on the picture below.)

You can help prevent the spread of gypsy moths by thoroughly checking any plant/forest materials you are transporting, as well as RV's, trailers, etc... for gypsy moth egg masses. This is the #1 method of movement from one area to another.

If you think you have gypsy moths active in your area, please bring a specimen in to the UWEX office. You can also call us or stop by to get more information.

Lastly, note the opportunity to learn more about gypsy moths (continuing education credit!!) at the Gypsy Moth Sessions on February 1 in Wausaukee and in Marinette.