

Brown-tail moth

BALI's Technical Director, Neil Huck, has warned of a significant increase in numbers of brown-tail moths this year. The hairs on the caterpillars associated with the moth can inflict a painful rash on humans and, although the risks are low, some individuals may also experience respiratory problems after breathing-in the hairs.

The risk to landscape operatives is significant, particularly to those involved in any type of vegetation management.

What are they?

Brown-tail moths (*Euproctis chrysorrhoea*) are insects native to the UK. One of the growth stages is a black, hairy caterpillar, which feeds on various plant species, but most notably the *Rosacea* family.

What's the risk?



The black hairs found on the caterpillar may easily become airborne or attach to leaves and scrub. When the hairs come into contact with human skin, they can cause physical irritations such as a rash and itchy, blistered and swollen skin.

See picture, left, of an operative with rash following contact with a caterpillar.

In rare cases, if the hairs are inhaled, they can get caught in the mouth or throat and cause irritation. Asthma sufferers should exercise caution and ensure they carry their inhaler with them. Individuals may also wish to wear a mask.

There is no antidote for the toxins, so treatment focusses on relieving symptoms and eliminating further exposure. Calamine lotion may be used.

Where are brown-tail moths found?

The moth (and therefore the caterpillar) is common throughout the south of England and Wales, but may also be found in some coastal northern regions.

Brown-tail moths are more likely to be found on hedgerow species such as hawthorn, blackthorn, plum, cherry, rose and blackberry. They are also likely to be found on bramble. This is not an exhaustive list, however, and individuals should remain vigilant for symptoms of the caterpillar.

What do I look out for?

The caterpillars of brown-tail moths first hatch during late summer and begin grazing and producing webbing. There is likely to be little evidence of defoliation on host plants at this stage, despite the risk to humans, and webbing (visible in photo, below) is clearly visible.



From April of the following year, there is likely to be extensive defoliation of host species and webbing. It is at this stage until the late summer that both plants and humans are at greatest risk.

The caterpillars (shown in photo, below) are up to 30mm long, black, with a white band along the sides. The body is covered with brown hairs. Two orangey-red warts at the rear end are also distinctive.



Detailed pictures of the caterpillar can be reviewed on a Forest Research webpage:
<https://www.forestry.gov.uk/fr/infid-8gqdw6>

NOTE: There is a similarity between brown-tip moths and the oak processionary moth. The following characteristics may help to distinguish between the two:

- Oak processionary moth (OPM) are more likely to be found on Oak specimens only. Although occasionally found on Oak trees, the brown-tail moth is more likely to be found on hedgerow specimens.
- OPM caterpillars have white hairs, whereas the caterpillars of brown-tail moths are brown.
- OPM caterpillars move about in nose-to-tail processions. Brown-tail moths do not.

Incidences of OPM should be reported to the Forestry Commission via their online reporting system:
<https://www.forestry.gov.uk/trealert>

As brown-tail moths are native to the UK, their presence does not need to be reported.