

March 2007

## Gypsy Moth

### *Lymantria dispar* (Lepidoptera: Lymantridae)

Gypsy moth, *Lymantria dispar*, is an important defoliator of a very wide range of trees and shrubs in mainland Europe, where it periodically reaches outbreak numbers. A small colony has persisted in northeast London since 1995 and a second breeding colony was found in Aylesbury, Buckinghamshire in the summer of 2005. It is not known how it came to be in either location but it is very likely that eggs were carried into the country on a vehicle, wooden packaging or imported timber. The British form of this moth, reportedly larger in size and to feed on bog myrtle and creeping willow in preference to forest trees, became extinct in the early 1900's.

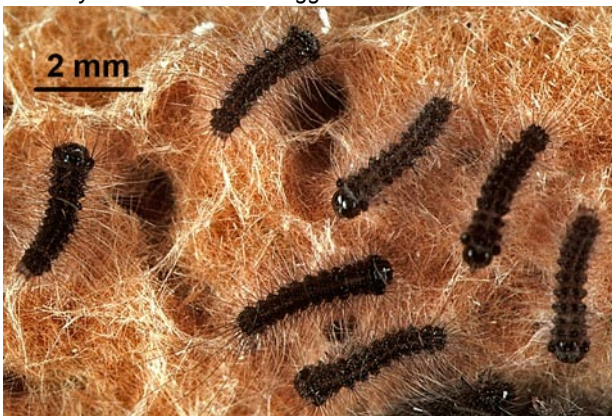
When fully grown, gypsy moth larvae (caterpillars) can be up to 70 mm long. They will feed on the leaves of many different species of broadleaf trees and shrubs. If food is short they will also feed on conifers. With voracious appetites, if present in large numbers, they can cause extensive damage to foliage and repeated defoliation can result in tree death (single defoliation of conifers). The caterpillars also possess irritating hairs and allergic reactions to the hairs, such as rashes and asthma, can be a problem for some people.

### Life Cycle

#### Larvae: April- August

Gypsy moth larvae hatch from the eggs in spring, usually in April. When first hatched they are uniformly dark in colour, very hairy and at just 2 mm long they are easily dispersed in the wind on silk threads, a process known as 'ballooning'. They feed on foliage through the spring and summer and reach full size (60–70 mm long) by August, having shed their skin a number of times to accommodate their growing bodies.

2. Newly hatched larvae on egg mass



1. Fully grown larva feeding on oak



As the gypsy moth caterpillars grow and mature their body colour lightens. Although it can be rather variable, most are brownish-yellow marked with black. All develop a series of distinctly coloured 'wart spots' along their backs: 5 pairs of blue spots behind the head and 6 pairs of red spots to the rear. This arrangement of spots distinguishes them from other similar caterpillars.

