

# Gypsy moths -- a perpetual problem

By JOANNE SPAHR  
**HARRISBURG** — They're just another example of man sticking his fingers where they didn't belong and ending up with a mess on his hands.

"They" are gypsy moths, and they're a problem.

Back in 1868 a Frenchman who was researching the silk-producing abilities of this common European moth imported a few into Massachusetts. While there are slightly different versions of the incident leading to their release, basically, a high wind set the moths free from their confinement and scattered them over the countryside.

Today, they are a problem.

Last year, alone, gypsy moth caterpillars visibly defoliated 1.3 million acres of trees in eastern Pennsylvania, and this year's situation is expected to be worse than in 1977.

The caterpillar stage is the point at which they are destructive. The caterpillars eat the leaves of hardwood trees, preferably oak, and heavy infestations strip trees of their leaves. In some cases, there is 100 per cent defoliation, and at that time, a mid-July forest area can have a "dead of winter" appearance.

Although it is difficult to generalize, William Slippey, control operations section supervisor for the Department of Forest Pest Management with the

Bureau of Forestry under DER, says that after one defoliation there can be as much as five per cent mortality rate in trees; after two consecutive years of defoliation, 15 to 30 per cent; and after three consecutive years of defoliation, as much as 50 to 60 per cent mortality.

"There is an area in Pike County, primarily forest land, where we do have over 50 per cent mortality," points out Slippey, "and in some sectors, there is an 80 per cent mortality in oak."

Not only do they defoliate and in some cases kill trees, but these caterpillars also can cause mental aggravation to the individuals living in infested areas.

"There have been stories of people having nervous breakdowns in the Poconos

from the caterpillars," notes Maurice Hobaugh, Valley District 17 forester, "People just can't stand having millions of those caterpillars dropping out of trees and invading their homes," he states.

Although some written accounts state that the mental anguish caused by gypsy moths is greatly exaggerated, the problem caused by the caterpillars is definitely a nuisance. For example, individuals have reported that a heavy infestation can cause car tires to spin and can force home owners to remain inside their homes.

How serious the problem is in Pennsylvania is hard to assess. According to Slippey, who has supervised government spraying programs in Pennsylvania

for the past eight years, the Commonwealth's problem areas are broken down into woodlots with some wooded ridges, which makes analyzing the problem difficult.

"The gypsy has been in Pennsylvania for several years," he states, "some areas are worse than others; in some areas they are

collapsing or cycling. In other words, the gypsy moth is in a state of flux."

Hobaugh noted that most of Lancaster County is in the "moderate defoliation" class. Moderate defoliation refers to 36 to 60 per cent defoliation. Hobaugh went on to say that there are some spotty areas in Lancaster County which have 61 to 70

per cent defoliation, and some areas in upper Chester and lower Berks Counties have 100 per cent defoliated trees.

To combat the problem, several avenues are presently being taken. According to James Nichols, chief of the division of Forest Pest Management with the

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