

UI Extension Forestry Information Series

Asian Gypsy Moth

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Many of you have probably read about the Asian gypsy moth discovered in 1992 along the Pacific coast. If it gets here, this pest could cause extensive damage to many trees in Idaho.

What is the Asian gypsy moth? The Asian gypsy moth is a close relative of the North American (N.A.) gypsy moth, which was introduced to Massachusetts from Europe in 1870 and grew to become one of the worst tree insect pests in U.S. history. In 1990 and 1991, the Asian gypsy moth was found in several coastal towns in Oregon, Washington, and British Columbia.

How did it get here? During an outbreak in Siberia, Asian gypsy moths deposited egg masses on ships docked in infested areas. These ships crossed the ocean and docked in western U.S. seaports, where the gypsy moth eggs hatched, and the insects moved inland.

How do the two gypsy moths compare? Asian and N.A. gypsy moths are virtually identical to the naked eye. The main difference is in behavior. Briefly, the Asian gypsy moth differs from the N.A. gypsy moth in that:

- Larvae eat conifer needles more readily (its preferred hosts are larch, alder and willow).
- Female moths can fly up to 20 miles, which allows populations to spread fast (the N.A. gypsy moth is flightless).
- Some eggs may hatch over a 3-year time period and at different times of the year.

What is being done to stop Asian gypsy moth? Several agencies are cooperating to prevent the Asian gypsy moth from getting a strong foothold here. The USDA Animal Plant and Health Inspection Service (APHIS) is leading the effort, including prevention,

trapping, eradication of new infestations, and intensified research on identification and behavior.

The Idaho Department of Lands has used pheromone traps to monitor gypsy moths since 1974. If any Asian gypsy moths make it here, the IDL traps should pick some up, as both varieties are attracted to the same pheromone.

We have had several calls from people who believed they had gypsy moth larvae. The following characteristics may help you distinguish between gypsy moth caterpillars and species they are commonly confused with:

- Gypsy moth: five red and six blue “bumps” on upper side of caterpillar. These features are often not visible on younger larvae.
- Tussock moth caterpillar: four distinctive tan “tussocks” (compacted hair tufts) on upper side of caterpillar, and long, dark, hair “horns” at front and rear.
- Western tent caterpillar: no bumps or tussocks; yellow and blue stripes running along upper side of caterpillar.

If you are not sure whether you have a gypsy moth, don't hesitate to bring a sample in for positive identification.

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