

Forest Pests

Invasive Plants and Insects of Maryland

Invasive plants and insects can be problematic for forest landowners. From vines that take over disturbed areas, forest edges, and tree canopies to insects that defoliate and girdle trees, these pests not only decimate the natural ecosystem, they are difficult to control and can be expensive to eradicate. This information sheet discusses the identification and guidelines for dealing with the insect commonly known as spongy moth.

Spongy Moth (*Lymantria dispar* (L.))



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DESCRIPTION

Spongy moth is a small insect from the Moth (*Lepidoptera: Lymantriidae*) family. Male moths are grayish brown and have a wingspan of 1 ½ inches, while female moths are white and have a wingspan of 3 ½ inches. Spongy moths have a one year life cycle that starts when female moths create niches in the bark of trees and lay egg masses (late July to September). Egg masses remain on the tree throughout the winter and larvae emerge (late April to early May).



Young larvae feed in the tops of trees and as they grow they develop 10 pairs of blue spots along their back. As the larvae mature, the back 5 pairs of spots turn brick red and the larvae begins to spend the night on the ground. In late June to late July the larvae begin to pupate and after 10 to 14 days, a moth emerges. The moth stage lasts only 1 to 3 weeks, during which the moths only function is to mate and lay eggs; they do not feed.

ORIGIN & SPREAD

Spongy moth is native to Europe and Asia, and was introduced to the U.S. in 1868 by a French scientist living in Medford, MA. Since that time, spongy moth has spread from New England to Michigan, Wisconsin, Indiana, Ohio, Pennsylvania, West Virginia, Maryland, Virginia, and Southeastern Canada. Female moths do not fly in North America and that has slowed the spread of the moth. However, accidental spread of the moth has occurred from people transporting egg masses that have been laid on firewood or outdoor recreational vehicles and trailers.

Federal and State governments conduct surveys to monitor the spread of the moth and spray insecticide to assist in slowing the rate of spread.

Spongy moth is an insect of great concern because of the diversity of host trees it attacks. Spongy moth larvae prefer to feed on the leaves of oak trees, but will feed on trees including but not limited to: sweetgum, willow, poplar, birch, apple, alder, boxelder, and hawthorn trees. Mature larvae cause the most leaf loss because they can eat an entire leaf at a time.

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SIGNS OF INFESTATION

Looking for spongy moth and being vigilant is critical in slowing the spread and damage caused by this moth. For forest landowners, it is important to identify trees that are being defoliated in the spring. Look for egg masses on tree trunks during the fall and winter. Look for larvae traveling up and down the trees in late May to early June.

If you find an infestation of spongy moth on your property, please contact the Maryland Department of Agriculture at 410-841-5920.

REFERENCES

Spongy (Gypsy) Moths and Caterpillars on Trees. University of Maryland Cooperative Extension. (2023).

<https://extension.umd.edu/resource/spongy-gypsy-moths-and-caterpillars-trees/>

USDA APHIS Fact Sheet: Spongy Moth. 2024.

<https://www.aphis.usda.gov/plant-pests-diseases/spongy-moth>