

Gypsy moths surface in Hills

By Casey Hays
staff writer

Parts of Farmington Hills are among the Oakland County areas infested by troublesome gypsy moth caterpillars.

Their attack in the spring is primarily on oak and hardwood tree foliage, according to Greg Patchan of the Oakland County Cooperative Extension Service. The trees, unable to produce energy once their leaves are gone, eventually die. Along highway M-20 between Mount Pleasant and Midland, 18,000 acres of trees were defoliated this year because of the problem caterpillars.

The U.S. Department of Agriculture (DOA) annually tests for these eggs in southeast Michigan. One nest contains from 250 to 1,000 eggs. DOA Supervisor Carl Dollhopf said 57 egg nests were found this year in wooded areas along the eastern Farmington Hills border.

In Oakland County, 2,444 nests were uncovered. Problem areas begin between 13 and 14 mile roads in Section one of the former Farmington Township, spreading diagonally northeast into Southfield, Bloomfield Township, Birmingham and Troy, Dollhopf said. Nationally, the gypsy moth infestation began in New England near the turn of the century. An entrepreneur brought gypsy moth caterpillars from their native Europe while developing a silkworm business. The caterpillars escaped and multiplied, having no natural predators in the United States.

EGG NESTS are carried across the country by people traveling through the Eastern states. The Farmington Hills problem began a few years ago when a doghouse infested with eggs was brought to the area. Two years ago, the Inkster-10 Mile area was sprayed for the problem; it's now under control.

"But there are too many problem areas to have this type of spraying today," Dollhopf said.

Local cities and townships will be more involved in deciding where and when to spray for the pests. Dollhopf's department sees the problem expanding in Oakland County, although "we're three to five years away from facing the full fury of the gypsy moth," he said.

Prevention efforts today would be futile until they appear in greater numbers. Trees are treated from the air above tree tops where the pests begin eating. Local governmental units will hold public meetings about the situation as treatments are needed, Dollhopf said.

RESIDENTS CAN look for caterpillar nests in travel trailers, under wheel wells and in other hidden areas, although a trained eye can only spot

about 20 percent of them. The nests are about one-inch long, three-quarters-of-an-inch wide and look like a brown felt strip. If you find one "cut it out and stomp on it," Dollhopf said.

The gypsy moth caterpillar can grow to 2 1/2 inches, leaving smelly droppings up to two inches thick on the ground around affected trees. Male moths are trapped during August and September each year to determine areas of infestation.

Hardwood trees such as oak, hickory and beech are their primary food source, but the caterpillar is "not very fussy about what it eats," Patchan said. Softwood trees and pines will be eaten when hardwood foliage is gone.

DOA officials have met with city officials in Bloomfield Hills and will meet with other cities throughout the year to discuss the problem. Areas around Bloomfield Hills are the hardest hit in the county, Dollhopf said.

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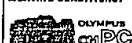
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