

Woolly bear: rare spring caterpillar

WOOLLY bear caterpillars may be a more appropriate topic for the fall season, but their presence in spring is what makes them unusual.

During fall, woolly bears are fairly common around neighborhoods, in fields and in wood lots. Many are moving quite fast for a caterpillar and make one think that they know where they are going and that they are late.

Though it may appear that they are moving rapidly, they are traveling at only 9.05 mph.

THEY MOVE fast in fall because cold weather is probably about to set in. With the advent of cold weather, woolly bears look for a place to spend the winter. Under a rock, in a tree crevice, or any other secure place will do.

But instead of forming a cocoon like most moths, they overwinter as a caterpillar.

Then in the spring, when temperatures are warm enough, they awaken and search for food. Once they have fed, they travel about searching for a suitable place to form a cocoon.

It seems strange to see a caterpillar so early in the season. Even before butterflies that overwinter as adults, like mourning cloaks or tortoise shells awaken, woolly bear caterpillars can be seen in the dried grasses of spring.

IF YOU TRY to pick up one, you



nature
Timothy Nowicki

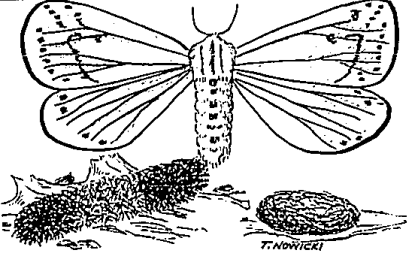
will be surprised how difficult it is. The hairs break off very easily when touched, causing your fingers to slip. This may be an adaptation that protects them from being eaten by a predator.

Following a light spring snack, the woolly bear finds a place to form a cocoon. In addition to silk used by caterpillars to form a cocoon, woolly bears weave in some of their long hairs. Most cocoons are made in April and May.

PUPA REMAIN in the cocoon for about two weeks. If the typical reddish and black banded woolly bear formed the cocoon, an Isabella Tiger moth will emerge.

Isabella Tiger moths are dull grayish, tawny yellow with some black dots on the wings. Females have approximately a 3-inch wing span, while males have a 2-inch wingspan.

Other woolly looking caterpillars come in black and white, tan, black with narrow red bands, or white. Most of these species develop into moths with bold white stripes on their wings; hence, the name tiger.



The woolly bear (lower left) spends winter as a caterpillar, forms a cocoon (lower right) in spring and emerges two weeks later as an Isabella tiger moth.

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