

Just like taxes, gypsy moths aren't going away

More on moths, 1D

By RALPH R. ECHTINAW
STAFF WRITER

There's a genocide campaign under way in Michigan aimed at a tiny little creature that only asks that it be permitted to defoliate every tree in the state.

Yes, we are referring to the infamous gypsy moth, a pernicious vermin that breeds faster than wild hares and, given its druthers,

will strip the landscape of greenery faster than Paul Bunyan and his blue ox, Babe.

The bad news is that gypsy moth infestations are like taxes. "This is not going to go away," said Rochester Hills parks and recreation director Mike Hartner. "This is going to be a permanent fixture in Michigan. We know they're in every section of our communities."

They certainly aren't difficult to hunt up in Rochester Hills' Thelma Spencer Park, on John R

just south of Auburn. A short walk through the woods Monday evening turned up enough gypsy moth caterpillars to fill county commissioner Larry Obrecht's ball cap.

Obrecht, a Republican who represents Oakland Township, said he would take the caterpillars to a commission committee meeting Tuesday and dump them on the table to illustrate the danger they represent.

There they are!

Monday's nature walk was put on by the Michigan State University Cooperative Extension Service to give local officials throughout the county an up-close and personal view of the caterpillars.

Among the participants were Rochester Hills Mayor Billie Ireland, Franklin Gypsy Moth Coordination Group volunteer Arnie Anderson, and Bloomfield Township grounds supervisor Jerry Kuchera. A Birmingham representative also attended.

Although the caterpillar population in Spencer Park is low, as gypsy moth infestations go, it could easily increase twentyfold in one year and eat every leaf in sight, said Mark Ticehurst, president of the National Gypsy Moth Management Group of Landisburg, Pa.

Ticehurst came along on the walk in the woods to provide information on the gypsies and perhaps drum up business for his company, which coordinates eradication campaigns. He's already helped Bloomfield Township, Franklin, Shelby and Macomb townships kill their moths.

Big dollars

Ticehurst pointed out caterpillars, fragments of destroyed leaves and egg masses throughout the park's small forest. "It's important to note that this is a small population," he said, estimating that there are about 250 egg masses per acre.

Ireland notes that Rochester Hills has to do something to murder the moths, but "you're talking big dollars," she said. When reminded that the city at least doesn't have the budget problems of the school district, Ireland said, "They have kids. We have gypsy moths."

The gypsy moth life cycle goes like this:

■ Born as small larvae in May, they descend from the trees Tazan-style on silken threads and are dispersed by the wind.

■ Becoming caterpillars in June, the larvae eat leaves by night and grow to lengths up to 2 inches.

■ The caterpillars make cocoons in July and emerge 10 days later as adult moths.

■ The moths only live for a week, but males mate with as many females as possible; then the females create egg sacs containing up to 1,500 eggs each. The eggs sit dormant all winter and hatch in May.

No enemies except us

Native to Asia, the moth came to this country in 1869 and has been spreading since. "It has an abundance of preferred food," Ticehurst said, and "it lacks the natural enemies it evolved with for over 2,000 years."

Those enemies include some tiny wasps and beetles that Ticehurst's company breeds and sells to communities buying the eradication service. Bloomfield Township, for example, bought some of the wasps, which partly destroy the moth egg masses.

Also, a naturally occurring virus can kill 95 percent of gypsy moth populations, but the virus only shows up when populations get big enough to strip trees for miles around. "Their guts turn to chocolate milk and they smell a whole lot worse," Ticehurst said. Scientists are working on ways to artificially introduce the virus, but they can't do it yet.

Homeowners can also help cut down the moth population, said Greg Patchan, an MSU Cooperative Extension horticulturalist.

Just nail a burlap sack to a tree and the caterpillars will congregate there during the day. Scrape the varmints into a jar in the evening; then burn or bury them. You can also help by finding and destroying egg masses in the trees.

MSU Cooperative Extension is distributing free a pamphlet on gypsy moths and how to kill them. To get yours, call 858-0880.



Here's one: Rochester Hills Mayor Billie Ireland inspects the caterpillars on a tree in the park.

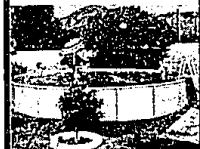


Moth patrol: Lions and tigers and gypsy moths, oh my! A group of local officials stroll through the park in search of caterpillars and egg masses.

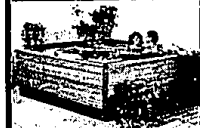


Varmints: Gypsy moth caterpillars like these are climbing most of the trees in Thelma Spencer Park in Rochester Hills to eat leaves.

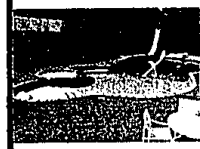
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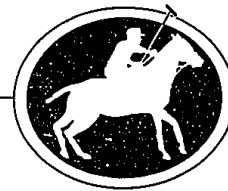
We're saving our fireworks for the fifth of July.

Somerset will be closed on Sunday, July 4th. But there'll be plenty of shopping excitement all day on Monday, July 5th, from 10 a.m. until 6 p.m. (Neiman Marcus will be open until 9 p.m.)

Have a happy holiday!

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