

EDITORIAL NOTICE: An outbreak of the Oak Processionary moth *Thaumetopoea processionea* (L.) (Lep.: Thaumetopoeidae) in south-west London

During late summer 2006, Oak Processionary moths were found breeding at three separate sites in south-west London. Adults moths were reported at light traps in nearby areas during the period in which the locally bred moths were emerging. It is unclear if these outbreaks result from accidental introduction or natural colonisation through immigration. All previous British records have been of immigrant males along the south coast from Cornwall to Essex.

The Oak Processionary moth presents an extremely serious threat to both the British landscape and to human health; it is of the utmost importance that any so far undetected colonies are eradicated. The adult moths fly in August, but in some years also into September. Since, as I type this Note, it appears that we may be in for some warm weather during September, this must surely increase the likelihood of moths persisting. If adult moths are indeed trapped it will be possible during 2007 to target the areas where they have been recorded and destroy larval nests that arise from over-wintered egg masses.

The larvae form communal nests on the trunks of oak trees, usually at the edges of woods or in open spaces rather than in the centre of forests. There are currently some good images of larvae and nests at <http://www.ipmimages.org/browse/subimages.cfm?SUB=13403> whilst adults are illustrated along with other related species in de Freina, J. J. & Witt, T. J., 1987. *Die Bombyces und Sphinges der Westpalaearktis*. Verlag, Munich and doubtless elsewhere. After emergence, the silk nests and empty pupal cases remain visible for some while on the trunks and can be searched for in September and October. The larvae cause huge environmental damage by their rapid defoliation of oak woodlands. Spraying of insecticides seems to be largely ineffective, but kills almost everything else; the environmental consequences of such action in a small island like Britain are horrifying. Like the Brown-tail *Euproctis chrysorrhoea* (L.) the caterpillars cause a severe reaction in humans. However, unlike the larvae of Brown-tail whose long hairs are urticating, the reaction to Oak Processionary larvae is caused by a toxin in the shorter body hairs. The symptoms may be extremely severe and the case of invalids or babies may, on rare occasion, be life-threatening. Doctors in the area around the known outbreaks have been informed, but there is a clear risk that visitors to local tourist attractions may have come from all over Britain and return to areas where most doctors will be unaware of the symptoms.

Entomologists in south-west and west London and adjacent areas of Surrey, Berkshire, Buckinghamshire and Middlesex in particular are asked to report all sightings/captures immediately – not waiting until the end of the year. Since one sighting was associated with the A40 trunk road, there is a possibility that road transport is a source of that infestation and it is wise to consider searching the A40 corridor as far west as Oxford. The outbreak and control of Oak Processionary is being monitored by Martin Townsend, to whom all information should be sent at 69 Alice Smith Square, Littlemore, Oxford OX4 4NQ (or via e-mail to: martin.townsend4@ntlworld.com). Dead specimens for confirmation are welcomed by Martin, but please include return postage if you would like him to return them.



Townsend, Martin. 2006. "An outbreak of the Oak Processionary moth *Thaumetopoea processionea* (L.) (Lep.: Thaumetopoeidae) in south-west London." *The entomologist's record and journal of variation* 118, 193–193.

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