

Eliminate Browntail Caterpillars Now!

Helpful tips from State of Maine Entomologists

AUGUSTA- With spring quickly approaching along with an eagerness to get students outside for both learning and activity, entomologists from the Maine Department of Agriculture, Conservation and Forestry remind you that now is the time to identify and work with grounds managers to remove browntail caterpillars from trees that are accessible. Browntail caterpillars cause a poison ivy-like rash and they are impacting a broad swath of Maine. Contact with this caterpillar's hairs can cause severe reactions for some individuals.



Rash caused by exposure to browntail moth hairs during gardening activities (Anonymous, used by permission)

Browntail caterpillars spend the winter webbed in silken-wrapped leaves on the tips of branches of oaks, apples and other hardwood trees. NOW is the time to look for the bright white silk tying a few leaves to the TIPS of your apple and other fruit trees and oak tree branches. If you see a web CLIP IT OUT and destroy the web by dropping it in a bucket of soapy water and soaking it overnight, do not just leave it on the ground. The caterpillars are ready to go once warmer weather arrives, so do this task as soon as possible!

Browntail caterpillar webs can be found in Maine from the New Hampshire border at Route 2 to the Canadian border near Fort Fairfield. Particularly high populations, as indicated by

damage recorded in 2020 aerial surveys, was found in fifty-four towns across seven counties. Kennebec county had the largest area mapped with over 52,000 acres followed by Androscoggin with nearly 30,500; Knox and Waldo each with almost 30,000; Cumberland with just over 9,000; Sagadahoc with almost 1,500 and Lincoln with 565 [acres mapped](#).

As we all have heard, “an ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure.” People have known that to be true of browntail for more than 100 years. Learn how to [recognize browntail moth webs](#), then go out and check your trees for their presence. If you find them and can reach them, clip and destroy them. If you can’t reach them and plan to treat them, now is the time to line up professional help for this spring.

Remember these tips:

- Survey on a **sunny day** with the **sun at your back**
- Inspect the **tips of the branches** on **hardwood** trees especially oak, apple and other fruit trees
- Look for **shining silk** tying last-year’s leaves to the branch; binoculars help. Web form varies quite a bit, sometimes they are the size of a large fist, sometimes they are a single leaf without much silk, they always have white strands of woven silk holding the leaf tight to the branches.
- Clip webs BEFORE the caterpillars emerge in mid-April
- Burn them or soak them in a bucket of soapy water to kill the caterpillars inside (don’t leave webs on the ground, the caterpillars will still emerge)
- Each web can have between 25-400 caterpillars inside so each web counts
- If time or funding is an issue focus on trees with webs in high traffic areas

Reminder: Taking action and keeping records of pest prevention and management activities on school properties is the responsibility of your school Integrated Pest Management (IPM) Coordinator. Be sure to report and coordinate all pest sightings and pest management activities, including browntail moth winter web sightings and removal, with your IPM Coordinator. Record-keeping forms and other resources can be found at www.maine.gov/schoolipm.

Background information, a video showing how to clip the webs, a list of arborists who could prune webs out of your reach and a list of licensed pesticide applicators that can treat the webs can be found at:

http://www.maine.gov/dacf/mfs/forest_health/invasive_threats/browntail_moth_info.htm

For More Information: Contact the [Maine Forest Service](#).

Additional Resources:

[A recorded webinar about managing browntail moth on school grounds featuring Barbara Chisholm, a Maine school nurse](#)

[Browntail moth resources](#) (Maine Forest Service) and [Removing Winter Webs](#) (video)

[Browntail moth school IPM fact sheet](#)

[Maine School Health Manual guidance](#) (ME DOE) and [Rash Fact Sheet](#) (ME CDC)

[Got the Itch?](#) (recorded webinar originally aired 11/17/16)

➤ [slides from webinar](#)



These overwintering webs of browntail in a hawthorn could easily represent more than 4000 caterpillars next spring. Clip and destroy webs within reach now, especially from isolated trees, to help reduce impacts from browntail moth later.



This web clipped from a crabapple tree could have more than 400 caterpillars in it. As those caterpillars grow, contact with hairs from them cause a rash for most people and can cause serious reactions in sensitive individuals. Clip webs and soak them in a bucket of soapy water overnight or destroy to reduce the numbers of larger caterpillars this spring and summer.



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