



NEWS RELEASE

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Winter moth surge concerns forestry officials

DURHAM, N.H.--Forestry officials are predicting a significant increase in winter moth-caused tree defoliation in Massachusetts and possibly in other Northeastern states.

Massachusetts Dept. of Conservation and Recreation Forest Health Coordinator Ken Gooch said the Bay State had a very heavy moth flight in late November and early December. "It was more widespread than they've seen in previous years," he added. "That means you can expect a wider area and heavier defoliation."

Winter moth males are the fliers and wingless females crawl up the trees to lay eggs. It is the green inchworm larvae that do the feeding damage come spring.

The insects are highly efficient defoliators and can strip hardwood tree leaves down to their lacey skeletons. They feed on a wide variety of hardwood trees including maples and oaks.

Last year winter moths defoliated about 80,000 forested acres in the state's North Shore, Metropolitan and Metro West and South Shore areas.

University of New Hampshire Graduate Student Mike Simmons is conducting winter moth tree damage field research. His study looked at 13 forest stands throughout eastern Massachusetts, as well as individual trees with known defoliation levels.

"What we found so far is that winter moth defoliation causes a dramatic decline in radial growth of red oak trees" said Simmons. "Forest stands infested with winter moth appear to be stressed and declining."

"The winter moth is definitely spreading," said UMASS Professor Joe Elkinton. "In some ways this is worse than gypsy moths, because it also defoliates maple trees." It is not known yet whether the mostly mild winter will help or harm the winter moth population. Research in Elkinton's lab is investigating this question.

The invasive insect *Operophtera brumata* was discovered in the Bay State in the 1990s. It is commonly found in Europe and the Near East. Winter moth is now established in Massachusetts, Rhode Island, eastern Connecticut and southern New Hampshire. It has also been detected in New York and coastal Maine.

“There’s not much people can do unless they spray,” said Gooch. “We recommend people use biological pesticides. Consult a certified arborist if they intend to do any spraying. They should be lining that up right now. “

Hope is on the horizon, however. Recent releases of winter moth-killing parasitic flies show promise in controlling the pest’s population in the coming years. The parasitic fly *Cyzenis albicans* preys on the moth’s young.

“The researchers had a really good year for releasing the parasitic fly,” added Gooch. “They’ve established it in five areas now. That’s how they controlled winter moth in Nova Scotia.”

The US Forest Service Northeastern Area State & Private Forestry provides funding for research on winter moth-caused forest damage and biological controls for the invasive pest.

The University of Massachusetts released a [report](#) in January providing details of the situation. A Massachusetts Dept. of Agriculture and Markets [pest alert](#) also discusses the issue.

National Invasive Species Awareness Week ran Feb. 26 through March 3.

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