

NOT PRESENT IN AUSTRALIA – REPORT IT – CALL 1800 084 881

SPONGY MOTHS

Lymantria dispar

Description

There are three biotypes of Spongy moth variously spread across northern Africa, Asia, Europe, and North America: the Asian (*L. dispar asiatica*), the European (*L. dispar dispar*) and the Japanese (*L. dispar japonica*). Generalist leaf feeders, these moths threaten hundreds of forest, orchard, and ornamental tree species.

Spongy moth biotypes are broadly similar in appearance but differ in the range of tree species they feed on, size and behaviour. Asian larvae grow larger, eat a wider variety of plants (including conifers), and hatch earlier. Adult Asian female moths can fly long distances, while European females are flightless.

Outbreaks of Spongy moth are driven by the availability of susceptible species in the landscape rather than by tree age. Large moth outbreaks occur in cycles, with repeated defoliations over several years causing tree death. Tree mortality can also occur if Spongy moth defoliation coincides with other stresses (e.g., drought, other pests or diseases).

Affected tree species

Spongy moths are known to impact more than 650 species of plants. The host range includes native, urban and plantation tree species, including species of eucalypt and pine.

Symptoms

The leaves and crowns of susceptible species are affected. Damage from young larvae appears as small holes in the leaf. As the larvae grow, the holes become larger and feeding occurs along the leaf margin. In the final larval stage, the entire leaf is consumed, and entire tree crowns may become defoliated.

Adult females are large (40-70 mm wingspan), pale to dark cream moths, with wavy, dark-coloured bands across the forewings. Males are smaller (30-40 mm



ABOVE: Spongy moth defoliation of entire tree crowns. Credit: Bill McNee, Wisconsin Dept of Natural Resources, Bugwood.org.

INSET: larva with characteristic double row of dots along the back: five pairs of blue followed by six pairs of red dots. Credit : Ferenc Lakatos, University of Sopron, Bugwood.org



Asian biotype of Spongy moth (*Lymantria dispar asiatica*)
ABOVE: male, BELOW: female. Credit: Alexander Schintlmeister, PADIL.

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wingspan) with darker brown patterns on the wings. Darker, brown-black variants may also be observed.

Larvae can grow to 70 mm in length, are dark, hairy. Older, large larvae have a characteristic double row of dots along the back: five pairs of blue followed by six pairs of red dots.

Masses of 100-1000 eggs laid on stems and branches and are covered with brown-yellow coloured “furry” scales from the female moth.

Suspected cases must be reported.

Time most likely to be seen

The larvae are the most observed life stage and can be observed from early spring to summer. Young larvae feed by day, while older, larger larvae feed at night. During large outbreaks, irrespective of age, larvae feed continuously. Adults are seen through summer. Brown scale-covered egg masses are visible from late summer through to the following spring.

Can be confused with

There are native and exotic hairy caterpillars that can resemble Spongy moth larvae. However, the distinctive patterning of the double row of dots along the back of larvae is indicative of the species.

Further information

- Pest and Diseases Image Library – <https://www.padi.gov.au/search?q=Lymantria>.
- Atlas of Living Australia – <https://bie.ala.org.au/search?q=Lymantria+dispar+>.
- Global Biodiversity Information Facility – <https://www.gbif.org/taxon/3WRPC>.
- European and Mediterranean Plant Protection Organization Global Database – <https://gd.eppo.int/search?k=Lymantria+dispar+>.



Spongy moth caterpillar feeding on conifer. Credit: Karla Salp, Washington State Department of Agriculture, Bugwood.org



Spongy moth egg mass covered in brown scales on tree bark. Credit: Karla Salp, Washington State Department of Agriculture, Bugwood.org

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