

Gypsy Moths...obnoxious summer visitors

Gypsy moth caterpillars, observation reveals, are attracted to painted trim on houses. Morning after morning, and several times each day for the past month, as many as a dozen fuzzy black creepy-crawlers have met a squishy end because they are so easily spotted working their way upward over the smooth painted surface of my house trim. Nor is mine the only house where the phenomenon has been noted.

More reasons than one may account for their preference: perhaps caterpillars are drawn to white colors, or perhaps they find negotiating smooth dry paint easier than climbing rough-surfaced tree trunks or shingles. In any event, hundreds have met premature death because they catch my eye and are easily dispatched after being poked from their perches with a long stick.

While nobody can hope to rid the neighborhood of these obnoxious pests by destroying even hundreds of gypsy moth caterpillars, there is satisfaction in wiping out each one. In only a few short weeks the caterpillars will transform themselves to flying moths. In this, their breeding stage, each male will search for fertile females who, in turn, will produce egg masses from which next year's generation will emerge.

Last summer, moth traps, baited with a scented lure impregnated with sex-attractant chemicals, corralled thousands of male moths before their search for a female could succeed. Thousands of females, as a result, went virginal to their graves. This year's generation of caterpillars has proved

less destructive than those of recent previous years.

Again, this summer, I shall bait moth traps and hope to snare all the flying males before the females are receptive to masculine attention.

Caterpillars and moths are far from being the only insect pest plaguing us in summer. The insect world is an enormous assemblage, most of it hostile to man and his goals. While bees and some wasps are assuredly beneficial to mankind, the majority of insects is designed to wreck our contentment.

Mosquitoes, deer flies, fleas, gnats, and no-see-ums attack us directly. Leaf-hoppers, squash bugs, tomato worms, leaf-miners, and hundreds if not thousands of other species attack our crops and foliage plants. Insecticides, while providing some control, threaten our own good health. Blue-lamped lanterns bring flying insects to sizzling electrocution. Yet the insect populations thrive.

Someone asked me recently if Florida, with its hot, humid climate, isn't alive with bugs. And my negative reply came from several winters' experience.

"The lizards keep most of the bugs under control," I mentioned.

"Lizards? What lizards?"

"Just little lizards. Like chameleons. They are everywhere, outside, all over Florida. Once in a while one gets in the house, but usually they stay outdoors and eat insects."

"How big are they?"

"Oh, they range from babies an inch or so long to grandfather size, up to seven inches. Lizards are harmless, live in gardens, hedges, behind shutters, wherever they find shelter and cover. You see them scurrying, darting away, whenever you approach any bush or plant."

Curiosity aroused by the question, I looked up lizards in my Field Guide to American Wildlife. From its descriptions I couldn't be certain whether Florida lizards are really lizards or skinks. Those little reptiles I'm familiar with may be south-eastern five-lined skinks; if it's lizards they are, then six-lined racerunners overrun our gardens and hedges. Whichever, I treat them gently.

In fact, I'm tempted to bring a few dozen home with me each spring to see if that might not be a solution to keeping our insect population under control around the Cape house. Maybe they will develop a taste for gypsy moth caterpillars. What a happy thought!

Better not, though. It's possible to disturb the balance of nature by introducing a foreign creature into a new environment. Much as I appreciate lizards in their natural habitat, I've no desire to be ankle deep in the critters.

Just think what happened after a single pair of gypsy moths escaped from a scientist's laboratory and flew off to start new generations of chewing caterpillars that now endanger woodlands of half the nation!

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