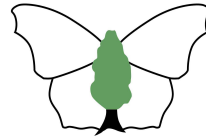


## Potential and occasional problem species



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### Oak Processionary *Thaumetopoea processionea*

**Usually reported:** May to June.

**Potential problem:** On the continent, caterpillars are a major defoliator of oak, although the trees usually recover. Additionally the caterpillars are covered by minute urticating hairs which contain a toxin, and contact with these can cause severe and persistent skin irritations, eye problems, sore throats and respiratory problems. These hairs are easily dispersed in local air currents around infested trees, so that symptoms often occur without direct contact. Abandoned nests should be treated with caution as these will retain hairs from previous occupants.

**Identification:** The caterpillar or nest is the stage usually encountered. The caterpillar is grey with a single blackish-grey stripe along its back, and is covered in long white hairs. Additionally, very short barbed hairs (<1mm in length) arise from small reddish-orange warts on the back, these contain a powerful toxin. It has a whitish line along its side and the head is brownish-black. The caterpillars live gregariously in spinnings (nests) made of white silk webbing on the hostplant, typically under a branch or on the trunk (and can be at any height on the tree, occurring from ground level), these nests taking on an orangish-brown colour with age.

The caterpillars follow one another head-to-tail in long 'processions' from one feeding position to another. Nests are often the size of a tennis ball, or larger. Defoliation can be seen in the form of localised (or larger) areas of the tree with leaves stripped down to the midrib and/or side veins. The adult moth, which is infrequently seen unless specifically looked for, is brownish-grey, with two darker cross-lines on the forewing and a faint crescent mark between these lines. The base of the forewing is paler, as is the hindwing.

- Full-grown caterpillars range from 20-25mm in length.
- Adult wingspan 31-41mm.

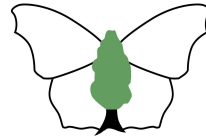


*Adult Oak Processionary (Photo: M. Parsons)*

**Confusion species:** Similar to the Pine Processionary *Thaumetopoea pityocampa* which is very rarely recorded in this country, but browner with a paler basal area of the forewing and having the cross-

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lines of the wing smooth rather than jagged. The communal nature of the caterpillars helps to distinguish the caterpillars from other species.

**Distribution:** A native of central and southern Europe, although its range has been expanding northwards, possibly in response to climate change, and the breeding range now includes northern France, Belgium, Holland and Germany. Until recently this moth was only known as a very scarce immigrant (all males) in this country, with the first record from Cornwall in 1983, and subsequent sightings from Devon, Dorset, Hampshire, Isle of Wight, Kent, Essex, Cambridgeshire, Suffolk, Norfolk and Northamptonshire. Now resident in the Channel Islands where it was first reported in 1984. In 2006 the species was found breeding in two areas of west London. In both cases the colonies were centred on plantings of imported semi-mature non-native oaks, upon which they were almost certainly imported as eggs. There is no pattern of occurrence suggesting natural colonisation to this country.

**Ecology:** Usually found at the edges of woods or in open spaces, such as parkland. The caterpillars form communal nests on the trunks of oak trees, feeding on the foliage of oaks from April to June. Has been found feeding on non-native oaks as well as native trees. On the continent, caterpillars have also been reported from hornbeam,

hazel, beech, sweet chestnut and birch, although usually when growing next to defoliated oaks. They generally pupate on the trunks within the nests, the nests and empty pupal skins often remaining visible some time after emergence. The adults fly from July to early September. Overwinters as an egg batch of between 100 and 200 eggs attached to the twigs of the hostplant and covered by greyish scales.

**Control:** A program of monitoring, control and eradication is ongoing in London, co-ordinated by Forest Research and local authorities. Please report all possible sightings anywhere in the UK either of adults or larvae to Christine Tilbury, Forest Research, 01420 22255 [christine.tilbury@forestry.gsi.gov.uk](mailto:christine.tilbury@forestry.gsi.gov.uk). Control should be carried out by qualified personnel and close contact with possible nests should otherwise be avoided. Further information is available at <http://www.forestresearch.gov.uk/fr/INFD-6URJCF>.

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