

Oak processionary moth

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Species Description

Scientific name: *Thaumetopea processionea*

Native to: Central and southern Europe

Habitat: Closely associated with oak trees, but occasionally observed on other broad leaved species, e.g. sweet chestnut, hazel, beech, birch and hornbeam

Adult flies July to September, it is well camouflaged against the bark of an oak tree and therefore can be difficult to spot. Its wingspan is 30-40mm, mottled grey wings with a comma shaped marking on centre of forewing.

Caterpillar is seen from May to July, it has a grey body and dark head, with long white hairs protruding from reddish-brown warts along length of body. Older caterpillars have a dark stripe along middle of back and whitish line along each side. Usually found living and feeding on oak trees, clusters together while feeding and forms nose-to-tail processions while moving.

Nest are made from distinctive white silken webbing and positioned on trunks and branches of oak trees. They range in size from a few centimetres wide to stretching several feet up the trunk. Nests are accompanied by white, silken trails on trunks and branches, both nest and trails discolour after a short time which makes them more difficult to see.

Oak processionary moth was first introduced to Great Britain in 2006 through the importation of contaminated oak plants from continental Europe. In 2020 a nest was discovered in Dublin on recently planted oak trees imported from Belgium, however this nest has since been eradicated. Oak processionary moth is not present in Northern Ireland.

Where large populations occur, they can strip a whole oak tree bare, leaving them more vulnerable to other pests, diseases and stresses.

Oak processionary moth is a health risk to humans and animals who come in contact with the hairs of older caterpillars. They can cause skin and eye irritations, sore throats, breathing difficulties and, rarely, allergic reactions.

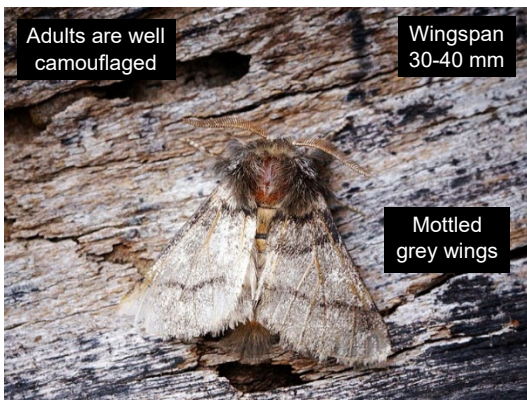


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Report any sightings via; Treecheck - <https://www.treecheck.net/>, iRecord app, CEDaR Online Recording - <https://www2.habitas.org.uk/records/ISI>, or Invasive Species Northern Ireland website - <http://invasivespeciesni.co.uk/report-sighting>

Identification throughout the year

Caterpillars are generally seen from May – July and have a distinctive habit of moving in nose-to-tail processions in late spring and early summer. Nests are built in early summer. Adults can be seen from July – September.

Health risks

There is no health risk posed from moths (the adult form of the species). Health risks are caused by tiny hairs from older caterpillars, which when threatened or disturbed can be shed. The hairs can be blown by the wind and accumulate in nests which can fall to the ground. The risk of exposure to these hairs is highest in May and June.

If you believe you have found an oak processionary moth caterpillar or nest, keep a safe distance and please report it immediately.

Report sightings to Treecheck - <https://www.treecheck.net/> or contact DAERA plant and tree health – 0300 200 7847 or planthealth@daera-ni.gov.uk.

Similar Species

The caterpillars of oak processionary moth are highly distinctive due to the long white hairs and reddish-brown warts and are unlikely to be confused with other species. Adults are similar to other moth species and are difficult to accurately identify.

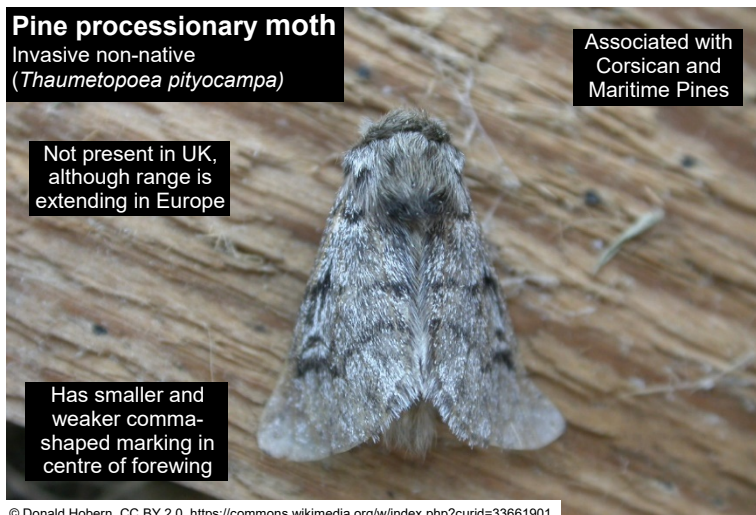
Pine processionary moth

Invasive non-native
(*Thaumetopoea pityocampa*)

Associated with
Corsican and
Maritime Pines

Not present in UK,
although range is
extending in Europe

Has smaller and
weaker comma-
shaped marking in
centre of forewing



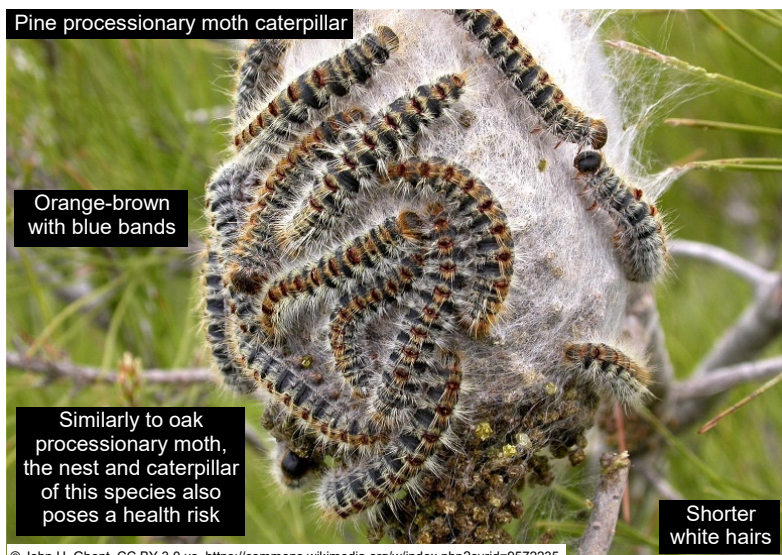
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Pine processionary moth caterpillar

Orange-brown
with blue bands

Similarly to oak
processionary moth,
the nest and caterpillar
of this species also
poses a health risk

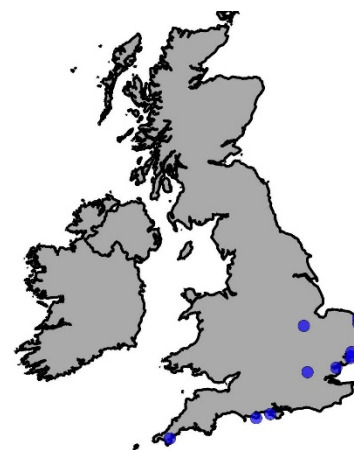
Shorter
white hairs



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Distribution

Not present in Northern Ireland, UK records are concentrated around London.



Source: NBN Atlas

<https://species.nbnatlas.org/search/?q=Thaumetopoea+processionea>

Check website for current distribution

Pale eggar

Native
(*Trichiura crataegi*)

Lacks comma-
shaped marking
in the centre of
forewing



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References and further reading:

Booy O., Wade M. and Roy H. 2015. Field Guide to Invasive Plants and Animals in Britain. Bloomsbury. London.

CABI datasheet - *Thaumetopoea processionea* (oak processionary moth) available
<https://www.cabi.org/isc/datasheet/53502>

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