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Leaf-eating gypsy moths making comeback, but county plans to fight them

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After posing no significant threat for a few years, a defoliating insect is making a comeback, and Monmouth County government is planning its attack.

The gypsy moth, in its caterpillar stage, eats the leaves of trees and shrubs.

"Gypsy moth caterpillars that had ravaged our parks and open spaces in the early 1990s and before are back, and we are prepared to fight them," said Thomas J. Powers, director of the county Board of Freeholders. "Fortunately, we have the resources for this purpose. We are mobilizing, now, in preparation for next year."

In September, the Monmouth County Shade Tree Commission is to conduct counts of gypsy moth egg masses, according to the county.

"These counts will help us focus on our aerial spray program next spring," said William Porter, commission vice chairman. "I urge all county residents who find egg masses to contact the Monmouth County Shade Tree Commission."

"Chances are if you find one egg mass, you've missed nine others," Porter said. "So it is important to let us know."

The commission telephone number is (732) 431-7903.

In the spring, the commission is to do aerial spraying using the *Bacillus thuringiensis*, or "BT," bacterium, according to the county. It's not hazardous to people or pets, the county said.

The caterpillars have finished feeding for this season. The insect, now in the moth stage, is breeding, according to the county.

"You can see the moths mating, now, and laying eggs," Porter said. "The female is the white moth that does not fly. She is, usually, walking on the lower bark of trees. The male is brown and flies around fertilizing females."

These egg masses will hatch in the spring, according to the county. Then, the caterpillars climb trees and shrubs to feed.

In its moth stage, the insect does not defoliate, the county said.

The gypsy moth, native to Europe and Asia, began defoliating New Jersey vegetation in 1966, according to the county. Three major population cycles have occurred — in 1972, when 256,000 acres in New Jersey were defoliated; in 1981, when 798,000 acres were defoliated; and in 1990, when 431,000 acres were defoliated.

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