Spongy Moth Frequently Asked Questions

What are spongy moths?

Spongy moths (formerly known as *gypsy moths**) are invasive insects that damage trees during their caterpillar stage by feeding on the leaves. Large outbreaks can lead to severe defoliation, resulting in millions of dollars in damage.

The **European spongy moth** (*Lymantria dispar dispar*) is a subspecies that feeds on the leaves of many broadleaf trees and shrubs, especially oaks. European spongy moth was introduced to the eastern United States in 1869, it is now established in about 20 states across the Northeast and Midwest.

Because female European spongy moths cannot fly, their natural spread is limited. Most new infestations occur when people unintentionally transport infested materials to new areas.

**The common name was changed from gypsy moth to spongy moth by the Entomological Society of America in 2021. The new name reflects its spongy egg masses, aligning with the French common name for the species (spongieuse).*

What do spongy moths look like?

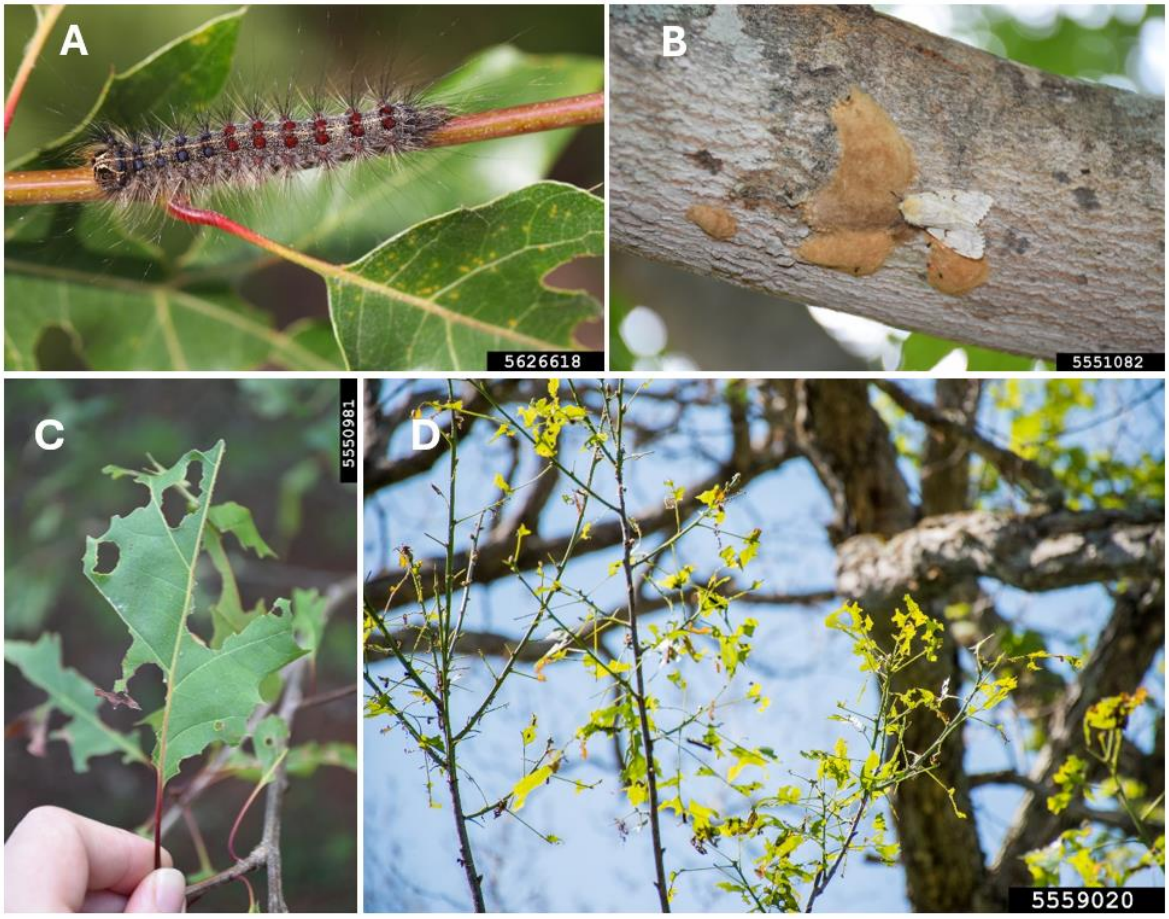
Spongy moth caterpillars appear in spring and early summer. Newly hatched caterpillars are black and hairy. Older caterpillars are a mottled yellow to gray color with tufts of bristle-like hairs. They also have a distinctive color pattern along their backs with five pairs of blue dots followed by six pairs of red dots. They are about 1-1/2 to 2-1/2 inches long when fully grown.

Adult male and female moths look different from one another. **Adult male spongy moths** are brown, have feathered antennae, and can fly. **Adult female spongy moths** are white, do not have feathered antennae, and are heavy-bodied and flightless. Many native, non-damaging

moths look very similar to spongy moth adults; seeing a similar-looking moth is usually not cause for concern.

Egg masses are present in late summer, winter and spring. Female moths attach egg masses to trees, stones, walls, logs, and household items, such as patio furniture, children's toys, and lawn equipment. Each egg mass contains up to 1,000 eggs and is covered with buff or yellowish "hair" (from the abdomen of the female). Egg masses are about 1-1/2 inches long and 3/4-inch wide on average.

Infested trees may be partially or completely bare of leaves. Defoliated trees do not always die following defoliation, they may recover if defoliation is not too severe or ongoing.



A: *Spongy moth caterpillar. Caterpillars appear in spring and early summer. They have a distinctive color pattern along their backs with five pairs of blue dots followed by six pairs of red dots. Photo by Steven Katovich, U.S. Forest Service*

B: *Female spongy moth and egg masses. Egg masses are present in late summer, winter and spring. Each egg mass contains up to 1,000 eggs and is covered with buff or yellowish "hair" (from the abdomen of the female). Photo by Karla Salp, Washington State Department of Agriculture*

C & D: *Spongy moth feeding damage (defoliation). Only the caterpillar state causes feeding damage to trees. Photos by Karla Salp, Washington State Department of Agriculture*

Does Idaho have spongy moths?

Idaho does <u>NOT</u> have established spongy moth populations thanks to the Idaho Spongy Moth Trapping Program. Forest health professionals at the Idaho Department of Lands (IDL), Idaho State Department of Agriculture (ISDA), and the USDA Forest Service (USFS) conduct extensive annual monitoring to rapidly detect and eradicate new introductions.

Each summer, thousands of traps with sticky interiors are deployed across the state. Pheromone lures placed inside the traps attract male spongy moths, who get stuck when they enter the trap. Traps are collected in the fall and analyzed.

The Idaho Spongy Moth Trapping Program has successfully detected and eradicated spongy moths in multiple Idaho communities since its inception in 1974.

Spongy moth monitoring trap. The inside walls of the trap are sticky and a pheromone lure is placed inside the trap to attract male spongy moths. Trappers from IDL, ISDA, and USFS deploy and check thousands of traps in Idaho each year.

What happens when a spongy moth is captured in Idaho?

When a spongy moth is captured in Idaho, the first step is to determine whether a true infestation is present. This involves **delimitation trapping**, where the surrounding area is inundated with traps the following year. If additional moths are present, delimitation trapping will show the extent and severity of the infestation.

Often times, the capture of a single male moth does not represent an establishing, breeding population, and no additional moths are captured in delimitation trapping the following year. If delimitation trapping *does* reveal concerning spongy moth populations, the next step is to plan precisely-timed eradication treatments using *Bacillus thuringiensis* (*Bt*), a naturally occurring bacterium that is toxic to spongy moths when ingested. Through this program, delimitation and eradication can be achieved with the least expense and lowest risk of environmental impact.

Spongy moth capture in Sandpoint

In 2024, spongy moth was detected in Sandpoint for the first time in more than 30 years. A trap located near the intersection of Oak Street and Division Street captured a single male moth. The specimen was confirmed to be European spongy moth via DNA analysis. Most likely, this moth was accidentally introduced by someone traveling to Idaho from an infested state in the eastern U.S. Spongy moths (especially their egg masses) can hitchhike on materials like firewood, campers, outdoor furniture, and even vehicles.

The last time spongy moths were captured in Sandpoint was between 1986 and 1990. At the peak, 334 moths were captured in Sandpoint in 1988. The population was successfully eradicated by 1991. Traps are placed in Sandpoint every year at a density of one trap per square mile, and no additional spongy moths have been captured in Sandpoint until 2024.

The single male European spongy moth captured in a sticky trap near Oak & Division in Sandpoint, Idaho. The string pictured in the photo is the pheromone lure. Many native, non-damaging moths look very similar to spongy moth adults; seeing a similar-looking moth is usually not cause for concern.

Next steps in Sandpoint

In 2025, IDL will be placing approximately 132 delimitation traps in Sandpoint to evaluate whether the detection in 2024 was limited to the single moth captured or whether it represents a breeding population. Results of the delimitation trapping help guide future steps, if any are needed, to prevent the establishment of this invasive tree pest.

Planned area of spongy moth delimitation trapping in Sandpoint for 2025. The yellow cross represents the location of the 2024 capture of a single male spongy moth. The surrounding grid represents planned delimitation traps for 2025, placed at a density of 36 traps per square mile in the four square miles surrounding the capture site. Only approximate trapping locations are shown. Some cells may not be able to be trapped due to lack of access or permission on private property. Traps will be placed in the public right of way as much as possible, or on private property with permission from the landowner. Trap placement, checks, and removal will be conducted by the Idaho Department of Lands.

How can I prevent the spread of spongy moth?

If you see bright green cardboard monitoring traps, it is crucial to leave these traps undisturbed to allow for proper monitoring by the Idaho Department of Lands. Removing or vandalizing the traps can hinder data collection on the potential spongy moth population.

You can help prevent the spread of spongy moth and other invasive insects with the following steps:

- Avoid moving firewood long distances (buy it where you burn it)
- Check outdoor objects for signs of insects before relocating them
- Report any suspicious sightings or tree damage to the Idaho Department of Lands

Who should I contact with questions?

Please contact the Idaho Department of Lands Forest Health Program with any questions about the Idaho Spongy Moth Trapping Program.

Phone: 208-769-1525

Email: ForestHealth@idl.idaho.gov

Website: https://www.idl.idaho.gov/about-forestry/forest-health/

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