

Getting the winter moth to fly away

By Esther Baird
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May is an unpredictable month. But there is one natural phenomenon that is entirely predictable, other than the fact that it will downpour and freeze the day after I plant my pansies, and that is that our maple trees will get chewed into near oblivion.

Thank you winter moth.

Last November and December it was impossible to avoid the gigantic, skittery, swarms of moths that hovered like mini-blizzards throughout our neighborhood. They descended around any lit area, say for example, the entire front of my house. Entering our home had to be done with military precision. "Go, go, go. Run!" we'd yell to our daughter lest the wing-to-wing wallpaper of moths rise up and storm our foyer.

But the fall is just their pre-show. They are the bug that keeps on giving by . . . living.

Those moths lay their eggs in north shore trees such as oaks, cherry, crabapple, apple and the Prospect Hill predominant maple. And just like every child's favorite story, come spring they return as lime green *very* hungry caterpillars. These inchworms chew and chew and chew until all the maples leaves on our street look like they were attacked by a lace-making machine. Lace machines that create chew up leaf debris that sticks to our house, our patio table, all the gazillion of outdoor plastic toys, our grill and of course us.

As if the moth swarms and leaf destruction weren't enough, once the leaves are annihilated, the caterpillars descend to the ground via a piece of their silk where they whip themselves up a cocoon. On breezy days our back yard looks like a mini parachute convention for worms. Parachuters with zero sense of direction. I've found them in almost every outdoor meal, inching along my daughter's back, creeping along our new baby's head and tangled up in my hair, which, to be fair, does have a birds nest quality to it that might be confusing to a tree-obsessed caterpillar.

Every step of their lifecycle seems bent on maximizing the pest in *pestilent*.

I wondered, was it just I? Was it just our neighborhood up on Prospect Hill? Perhaps the moths were drawn to our much-lamented plastic toy collection? But it turns out that the winter moth is a big problem. The trees they attack can withstand a season or two of defoliation, but ultimately they cannot survive. Since we like our trees, a number of state representatives, including Beverly's own Mary Grant, put a line item amendment in the

'08 budget requesting "not less than \$250,000 shall be expended for the University of Massachusetts Agricultural Department to continue a program to control and eliminate the winter moth worm."

As of this column, the number had been knocked down to \$150,000 and is yet to be appropriated —still if the government is in on it, it must be more than just my backyard.

Curious, I called the UMass Agricultural Department and was put in touch with Dr. Joe Elkinton a forest entomologist. I introduced myself over the phone and explained that I wanted information about the winter moth and its worm, or, I asked, was it a caterpillar?

"Actually," replied the cheerful professor, "you can refer to it as either. Inchworms are a type of caterpillar." "Aha!" I hadn't known that and filed it away as a bit of trivia I might yank out at an entomologically correct time.

We went on to chat about Joe's efforts to control the moths with the release of a particular fly.

"HMMMMM," I mused, "but would the introduction of these flies simply add yet another pest to our back yards?"

"No," answered Joe, "these flies mind their own business – people won't notice them. We've already released them in Wenham, Hingham and Falmouth this spring."

I made a mental note to inspect the trees in Wenham on and to note if I encountered any flies that *weren't* minding their own business.

He continued, "They have completely controlled the defoliation in Nova Scotia and in the Pacific Northwest by using this fly — they lay eggs which the caterpillars ingest and that causes them to die."

Interesting. I'm not looking to wipe out a species or anything except . . . maybe I am. I really just prefer trees to moths and worms.

And so we'll see. Perhaps some of those flies will fly on down 1A and make their way into my backyard, perhaps the \$150,000 will be appropriated and perhaps next fall we'll be blizzard free so that next spring our trees will have wholly formed leaves.

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