

## ENVIRONMENT BULLETIN

*Conrad Grégoire and David Overholt*

### Hickory Tussock Moth

Over the past few years, we have observed a growing population of the Hickory Tussock Moth. A quick reference to the internet tells us that the caterpillars of these moths are venomous, concentrate toxins at the end of their fluffy hairs and are even an invasive species. A closer look tells a different story.

The larva, a caterpillar, is completely covered in long, hairlike fibres arranged in spreading tufts. Most are white, but there are black tufts along the middle of the back, and four long



black hair pencils, two near the front, and two near the back. There are black spots along the sides, and the head is black.

The adult moths are seen flying in May and June and the caterpillars are seen between July and October. They feed in groups of about 100 or so with older larvae being more solitary. They grow up to 4.5 centimeters long before pupating for the winter. In our area, caterpillars primarily feed on willow, oak, sumac, and other plants. It is reported that they can defoliate a tree, but that they do not cause significant damage to the tree.

On reading the more scientific literature, it turns out that this moth is not an invasive species and is native to the Eastern half of North America.

## **Is the Hickory Tussock Moth Dangerous?**

The hairs of the hickory tussock moth caterpillar are microscopically barbed. These hairs are like tiny hooks of fiberglass that can embed in your skin and cause an itchy rash similar to nettles or poison ivy. Some of these hairs are small and may not be noticed on your skin. This is what causes the rash and not the presence of a venom or other toxic substance. This rash tends to be short-lived for most people lasting only several hours.

It is important to note that children are more susceptible to the rash than are adults, because children are also much more likely to be playing with them and handling them out of natural curiosity

If you do come into physical contact with these caterpillars, the advice is to wash the affected area with soap and water as soon as possible. In the case of itching or swelling, apply calamine lotion and/or ice packs to the affected areas. Some individuals may experience more lasting or serious symptoms and should seek medical advice from a healthcare professional.

## **The Last Word**

It is best to avoid these caterpillars and simply appreciate their beauty and place in the local ecology.

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