

"Bug of the Month"

An insect that makes its appearance in the fall is the banded woolly bear caterpillar, *Pyrrharctia isabella*. The woolly bear caterpillar can often be seen crossing roads in their search for overwintering sites.

WHAT DO THEY LOOK LIKE? The woolly bear caterpillar is densely coated with black hairs on each end and with a band of brownish colored hairs in the middle of its body. Fully grown caterpillars are about an inch and a half to two inches long. The adult moth is a tiger moth in the family Arctiidae and is commonly called the Isabella moth. The moth is yellowish to white in color with black dots on the wings. The thorax is robust and hairy, and there are three black stripes on the thorax that run parallel to the body.



WHAT DO THEY DO? Woolly bear caterpillars overwinter in the larval stage under logs, bark, rocks or other suitable hiding places. In the spring, the larvae reappear to feed for a short time before spinning a silken cocoon. In early summer the adults emerge to feed on flower nectar and to mate. Adult moths can be found around outdoor lights in the spring and again in mid to late summer. The females



deposit their eggs on a host plant that will support the larva when it hatches. The young larvae stay together at first, then separate and feed alone. Host plants include grasses, dandelions, asters, birches, clovers, maples, weeds and other vegetation. There are usually two generations per year, with the second generation appearing in September. This is the generation that will be seen crossing sidewalks and roads in the fall. An additional behavior of the woolly bear caterpillar is the defensive behavior of curling into a tight ball when disturbed.

For many years it has been believed that the brown band on the fall caterpillar could be used to forecast the severity of the upcoming winter. According to the legend, if the middle, brown band is narrower than either of the black bands, then the coming winter will be severe; if the three bands are equal, the winter will be average; and if the brown band is wider than the black bands, the coming winter will be mild. However, the relative amounts of brown and black are due to conditions of age, temperature, moisture, and other environmental conditions during the caterpillar's development. So if the width of the bands indicates anything, they are an indication of the current or past weather conditions, not of the future.

MANAGEMENT. Management of the woolly bear caterpillar is generally unnecessary. Numbers rarely become high enough to warrant any control.

Keeping the caterpillars through the winter is easily accomplished by inducing hibernation. As long as the caterpillar is kept cold, it will remain dormant. Simply place the caterpillar in a small, plastic container with a tight lid and place the container in a refrigerator crisper. Caterpillars can be kept there until spring arrives. Avoid accidental warming because the caterpillar will need food or it will starve after a few days. In the spring, keep the caterpillar in a clean container and supply it with fresh foliage. It will feed and grow for a couple of weeks and then spin its cocoon and then emerge as an adult.

MORE QUESTIONS? Please do not hesitate to give your "Bug Docs" a call at comm.: (360) 315-4450, DSN: 322-4450 or you can e-mail us at ndveccmei@pnw.med.navy.mil.