Hairy caterpillars
What you need to know

To help the Yandaran community cope with high numbers of hairy caterpillars, the Queensland Government and Bundaberg Regional Council have studied the problem and can provide the following advice about the caterpillars and how to protect yourself against this pest.

General information

Large outbreaks of these caterpillars have occurred in the past, with records dating back to 1903.

The caterpillars appear to prefer certain species of eucalypt and bloodwood trees, but little is known about their natural enemies. They grow into a native species of moth—Panacela sp.

Fully grown caterpillars are about 2–3 cm long, and are brown or orange-brown with pale lines along the body. The body is covered with numerous long, pale bristles and hairs. Along the middle of the back is series of eight dense tufts of black spines. The head is black with a white central patch.

The female moths lay hundreds of eggs and cover them with hairs from the abdomen. The caterpillars generally live in a silken bag binding together twigs and leaves of the host tree. Shelters are sometimes constructed around the trunk of the tree at ground level or between the forks of major branches. The caterpillars shelter during the day and leave the bag to feed at night, often stripping the host tree of leaves.

When fully grown, the caterpillars leave their shelters to spin a cocoon among foliage, under bark or among leaf litter on the ground. During this stage many of the caterpillars wander over the ground looking for a place to pupate.

In outbreak conditions the numbers of caterpillars are so great they often come into contact with livestock and gather around houses and other buildings. Contact with their bristles can cause intense irritation to people and animals.

Most caterpillar infestations are reasonably brief. Many infestations will die out—when food sources are exhausted or the caterpillars are eaten by other animals.

Eradication

Mass eradication in native bushland would be impractical and result in the deaths of many beneficial insects and animals.

However, eradicating individual caterpillars on your property will extend the protective buffer zone between your property and the infested area.

The recommended method is to wash down external areas of your house and other areas where caterpillars are, or have been, present with soap and warm water. Hairs may persist in some areas long after the caterpillars have moved on or pupated.

Household pyrethrin-based insecticides will also kill caterpillars. To ensure the correct insecticide is used, read the label to check if caterpillars are listed in the ‘pest’ column.

Make sure you read the ‘Your health’ section (overleaf) so you know how to protect yourself while eradicating caterpillars.
Long-term preventative measures

Placing bare soil or mulching with pebbles around the base of existing eucalypt tree trunks will help discourage pupation and resting in the caterpillar stage. Planting tree species that do not attract the moth is another way of avoiding caterpillar habitation.

Your health

To minimise the risk of contact you should avoid unnecessary exposure, particularly in known infested areas.

If exposure is unavoidable, such as when caterpillars are in plague proportions or during eradication activities, you should protect yourself with:

- overalls or long-sleeved, full button-up shirts/tops and full-length trousers
- a hat, ideally with neck protection
- eyewear
- gloves
- closed shoes or boots with thick socks that extend up into the trouser leg area or are fitted with covers around the ankle
- rubber gloves
- a P2/N95-type mask and a face shield to prevent inhalation of caterpillar hairs.

When the caterpillars are touched or move around, their body hairs are often dislodged. These hairs can fragment and drift onto surrounding surfaces (such as buildings, machinery and washing) and come into contact with humans.

Try to avoid disturbing leaf litter, bark, wood piles or other material that may carry caterpillar hair, and do not handle cast-off skins or caterpillar cocoons. The hairs easily penetrate exposed skin and cause irritation.

Contact with caterpillar hairs may result in inflammation, rashes, a burning sensation, dermatitis, itching and swelling of the affected area.

If the hairs are inhaled, soft tissue and mucous membranes in the respiratory tract, throat and nasal cavities may be irritated. This can result in swelling (similar to an allergic reaction) and breathing difficulties. Injuries to the eye have been recorded, resulting in conditions such as nodular conjunctivitis.

While some of these symptoms can persist for days, they usually ease within several hours, particularly when appropriate treatment is provided.

Seek medical advice if you have an adverse reaction. Creams containing weak steroids such as hydrocortisone (available on prescription) have proven effective in relieving symptoms, but are not recommended for use on young children or by adults for prolonged periods.

More information

For more information visit the Bundaberg Regional Council website at www.bundaberg.qld.gov.au or contact DPI&F on 13 25 23.