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Gypsy Moth

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The gypsy moth is a serious forest pest capable of causing severe damage to hardwood trees, especially oaks. This damage is inflicted as the gypsy moth larvae defoliate entire stands of trees. In cooperation with the USDA, Georgia deploys 3500+ traps per year to detect the presence of the moth. There are no known infestations currently in Georgia, although the threat is always present.

History of spread: Gypsy moths were brought into Massachusetts in the late 1800's. The intent was to farm the moths for silk produced by the larvae. It wasn't long before the moths escaped captivity and moved out into the surrounding woodlands. Many northeastern states now have established populations. Georgia has had outbreaks in White, Fannin and Rockdale Counties. These spots were eradicated by state and federal forestry officials. It is likely that they were started by individuals moving cargo with egg masses attached to it from infested areas. The natural spread of gypsy moths occurs as newly hatched larvae spin long silk threads and ride on the breeze. It will be many years before the natural spread brings gypsy moths into Georgia.

Identification & Life Cycle: The gypsy moth goes through four stages of development – egg, larvae, pupae

and moth. In summer, a moth lays up to 1000 eggs in masses between the size of a dime and quarter. The eggs are covered in the buff colored hairs the female pulls from her abdomen (Figure 1). The female will



Figure 1: *Gypsy Moth Egg Masses.*

lay eggs on most anything but usually does so in a protected area. In the south, egg hatch will begin in late March. Gypsy Moth larvae are very easy to distinguish when they are about half grown. The larvae have 5 pairs of blue dots and 6 pairs of red dots down their back (Figure 2). The larvae will enter



Figure 2: *Gypsy Moth Larvae.*

the pupal stage in May. Adult moths will emerge 10-14 days later. The moth is not very distinguishable. The larger female is a brown buff color. The male is darker and

smaller (Figure 3). Male moths fly off in search of females to mate



Figure 3: *Male and Female Gypsy Moths.*

with. The female European gypsy moth does not fly but the female Asian gypsy moth does.

Damage caused: The larvae or caterpillar is the destructive stage of the gypsy moth. These larvae feed on several hundred different trees species. During epidemic population levels entire forests can be stripped of their leaves. Several years of defoliation can lead to tree mortality. Trees stressed by environmental factors such as drought can be particularly hard hit by defoliation. The impact of gypsy moths would be felt by timber growers, wildlife managers and homeowners.