

Oak Processionary Moth update

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The sight of tree climbers clad in protective suits working from elevated platforms to remove the nests of the invasive insect pest Oak Processionary Moth (OPM) has become a familiar sight in Richmond Park in June and July each year. In 2012 four nest removal teams worked continuously through the summer removing the 4188 nests located by volunteer and staff surveyors. The aim is to remove the nests, which can contain hundreds of toxic caterpillars (*pictured below*), before the caterpillars pupate and emerge as adult moths in late July/August.

Manual nest removal forms part of The Royal Parks' rigorous management programme for the moth which has been present in the park since 2009. The caterpillars feed on oak leaves and can threaten the health of the trees by causing extensive defoliation. This has been the case in Germany where repeat episodes of OPM defoliation have resulted in the death of whole stands of infested trees, and this threat is of particular concern to our already vulnerable veteran oaks and those suffering from Acute Oak Decline. As is now well known, the older caterpillars are also covered in toxic barbed hairs which can cause a significant threat to human health.

In 2012, due to the forecast increase in nest numbers and the potential for it to be logistically impossible to remove them all before moth emergence, a decision was made to spray a small number of previously infested trees with a Lepidoptera-specific pesticide. In keeping with the statutory designation

of the park as a Site of Special Scientific Interest, The Royal Parks applied for consent from Natural England to carry out this operation, which was granted after careful consideration of the levels of infestation in the park, the increase in the moths' distribution, the relatively low impact on other Lepidoptera species, and the fact that it causes the least collateral damage of non-target species of all the pesticides authorised for use against OPM in the UK. Monitoring showed that the spraying was very successful.

This combined approach of pesticide spraying and manual removal will again be implemented in 2013 and the committed work of volunteer surveyors will continue to be crucial in the surveying for and location of nests. The Royal Parks also continues to work closely with the Forestry Commission and other stakeholders managing the pest and is a partner in a DEFRA-funded research strand seeking to learn more about its early detection.

