

Pine Processionary Caterpillar

Contributed by Editor
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All the latest news items can now be found on www.theresident.es Visit us now! The recent warm weather has triggered the activity of the pine processionary caterpillar. This furry little critter has spent the winter in its 'candyfloss' nest in the local pine trees and is now on the march looking for a nice bit of ground in which to pupate over the summer. The pine processionary caterpillar is the offspring of the moth *Thaumetopoea pityocampa* and besides being a serious pest to pine trees, stripping the young needles from their branches, it is also a danger to humans and animals alike.

The caterpillars have an unusual characteristic in that they climb down the trees and march along the ground nose to tail in a long ribbon, a habit which gives them their common name. The caterpillars have a potent defence system in the form of thousands of fine hairs which they discharge when threatened, and these hairs contain irritants which when touching the skin or eyes can cause serious problems. Worse still is if these hairs are ingested as it can lead to breathing difficulties, necrosis of the tongue and, in some cases, death of pets or humans.

Unfortunately the marching columns of caterpillars are fascinating to both dogs and children and it is as a result of this that injuries occur.

If you, your child, or your pet is injured after contact with these creatures, seek medical assistance immediately.

The nest

There are a number of ways of dealing with this pest, nests can be destroyed when they appear at the end of summer by cutting them from the tree and burning them (make sure you take care not to have any physical contact with the nest).

There are also insecticides available, but these are best left to pest control experts.

A new treatment, which was pioneered in Italy is now also being used. The new method, known as endotherapy, involves injecting a treatment into the tree trunk, rather than fumigating, the caterpillar then ingests the poison when it eats the needles of the tree. This system avoids the spread of potentially dangerous pesticides in the air, and is also more effective. Each treatment is supposed to be effective for two years.

On the march

Photos by Mike Padbury