

Brown tail moth caterpillars

During the spring each year, brown tail moth caterpillars emerge from hibernation and become very active and may be seen on the branches of trees and shrubs feeding on leaves.

They have small hairs all over their bodies which can break off very easily and cause an allergic irritation and skin rash, sometimes severely. Some people can also suffer a type of asthmatic reaction.

The caterpillars are brown in colour with a dotted white line down each side, with two distinct orange dots near the tail.

Normally by July, they turn into a black cocoon and after a couple of weeks hatch into the adult nocturnal moth, which has a brown body and white wings. After mating the adult moths lay eggs covered in hairs on the underside of leaves.

During the autumn, the eggs hatch, young caterpillars emerge and spin a web like a hairy tent structure at the end of a leaf shoot, so that they can congregate and hibernate through the winter.



How to control them

The most effective control method is to inspect trees and bushes between autumn and spring and remove any “tents” or caterpillars by pruning the twigs they are on, place them in a metal bucket to burn on site.

Always wear gloves, goggles and cover exposed areas of skin. This is because the tents and caterpillars will release the allergic hairs if disturbed.

If you are unfortunate to get the caterpillar hairs on you, the skin should be washed with soapy water and calamine lotion applied if necessary. The irritation will normally only last a couple of days, but if it persists or you have a severe reaction, see your doctor.

This information is provided for advice only. Crawley Borough Council does not provide a treatment service to remove affected leaves etc. from private property. However, some commercial pest control companies may offer to visit for a fee and remove affected foliage.