

## Lackey Moth Caterpillars

On walks along the coast path at the moment, you may notice an unusual sight, as shown in this photograph - a finely woven web sack covering part of the branch of a low growing Hawthorn or Blackthorn bush. Outside the web will be dozens of small caterpillars.

The species pictured here is the Lackey Moth. Apparently its orange, blue and white stripes reminded the eighteenth-century naturalist who first named it of the livery lace then worn by household servants, or lackeys. It is a member of the Eggar family of moths which has 10 resident species in the UK including some well-known ones such as the Oak Eggar, the Fox Moth and the Drinker. The moths are all hairy and thick set with warm brown or yellowish colours and with large caterpillars. Most of these caterpillars are also hairy but the Lackey is the exception.

The caterpillars sunbathe on the outside of their web refuge and wander around the bush to find leaves to feed on. When they are small they look black at first sight, but a close look reveals the coloured stripes which are easier to see when they are larger – see second photo. The small caterpillars have an unusual reaction to danger – they wave the front of their bodies around in a random kind of way. Faced with a dense mat of caterpillars all waving around in an agitated fashion, I think most predators would be suitably warned off!

Once fattened-up up on the leaves of the home bush, the Lackey Moth caterpillar will drop down into the undergrowth for its pupal stage. It will emerge as an adult moth in about June and the female will lay her eggs in bands around the foodplant (e.g. cherry, plum, apple as well as blackthorn or hawthorn) where they will overwinter until they hatch out as caterpillars in the spring.

Several species of moth and butterfly, during their caterpillar stage, adopt the practice of spinning a web and living communally in and around it as a means of protection from predators. The most notorious of these is the Brown-tail Moth. The hairs of the caterpillar can provoke an allergic reaction and they have the unfortunate habit of building their webs in semi-urban environments where they are most likely to cause problems! In such situations they are often subject to pest control measure. However, these moths, though common in SE England, are very rare here so no need to panic.

One family of small black and white micro moths, the Ermines, build huge webs which can stretch along a whole hedgerow and support thousands of caterpillars. At the other end of the scale the caterpillar of the Marsh Fritillary butterfly builds a small web on its foodplant Devil's Bit Scabious. These webs are quite delicate and near the base of the plant and can be quite hard to see, but are nonetheless used as a method to assess populations of the butterfly – they are certainly easier to count than single small caterpillars!



*Above: a larval web  
Below: A fully grown caterpillar  
Bottom: the adult moth*

