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## Maine Health Alert Network (HAN) System

# PUBLIC HEALTH ADVISORY

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**To:** All HAN recipients  
**From:** Isaac Benowitz, State Epidemiologist, Maine CDC  
Allison Kanoti, State Entomologist, Maine Forest Service  
**Subject:** **Health Risks from Browntail Moths**  
**Date / Time:** Thursday, April 13, 2023 at 10:00AM  
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## Health Risks from Browntail Moths

**Background:** The browntail moth is an invasive species of both forest and human health concern. Maine is the only state in the U.S. currently experiencing widespread problems with this moth. The microscopic hairs found on browntail moth caterpillars, shed skins, and cocoons can cause skin reactions and breathing problems.

**Symptoms:** Most individuals affected by the hairs develop a localized rash similar to poison ivy that will last for a few hours up to several days. In more sensitive individuals, the rash can be severe and last for weeks. Dislodged hairs can become airborne and cause trouble breathing, including respiratory distress, if inhaled. Symptoms result from both a chemical reaction to a toxin in the hairs and a physical irritation as the barbed hairs become embedded in the skin and airways.

**Seasonality:** Caterpillars are active from April to early July. Hairs from caterpillars, shed skins, and cocoons can become airborne and settle on vegetation and other surfaces. They can be stirred up during mowing, raking, sweeping, and other outdoor activities. Hairs remain toxic for 1-3 years in the environment but lose their toxicity over time.

Providers should be aware of the risk of browntail moth rashes, and the public should know what they can do to help reduce exposure to the browntail moth caterpillar hairs.

Browntail moth caterpillars are easy to identify. They are dark brown in color with white stripes along the sides and two red-orange dots on the back. Younger caterpillars lack these white stripes.

**Browntail moth winter web (left), caterpillar (center) & cocoons (right):**



*Photos courtesy of the Maine Forest Service*

**Maine summary:** The Maine Forest Service surveys indicate that most areas of Maine that have significant host tree populations are at some risk for browntail moth infestation. Preferred host trees include apple, birch, cherry, crabapple, oak, pear as well as other hardwoods. In 2022, the Maine Forest Service found increases in defoliation levels in Androscoggin, Penobscot, and Waldo counties while Cumberland, Kennebec, and Sagadahoc counties experienced a decrease in defoliation acreage. The 2022 and 2023 annual winter web survey detected webs in all counties in Maine. People may experience impacts even in areas with low or undetected populations of browntail moths. In interviews conducted as part of a defoliation prediction study by Maine Forest Service, people reported having experienced a rash attributed to the caterpillar in places with very low populations of browntail moth.

Browntail moth control may be occurring in some areas, but the risk to the public remains high in affected areas due to the persistent nature of the hairs. Visit the [Interactive Browntail Moth Dashboard](#) to see where the Maine Forest Service has noted browntail moth activity.

**Information for providers:**

- Be aware of the risk of browntail moth rashes, particularly in areas with known populations.
- There is no specific treatment for dermatitis due to browntail moths; treatment is focused on relieving symptoms and eliminating ongoing exposure.
- Mild rashes may be treated with calamine or caladryl lotion, hydrocortisone cream, or taking a cool oatmeal bath or baking soda. Severe reactions may require prescription medication.
- The toxin in the hairs is extremely stable and can remain a hazard for years.

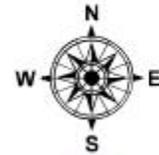
**Recommendations to reduce exposure:**

- Avoid places heavily infested by caterpillars.
- Take cool showers and change clothes after any activity that may expose you to browntail moth hairs.
- Dry laundry inside during June and July to avoid having the hairs embedded in clothing.
- Wear a respirator, goggles, and coveralls tightly closed at the neck, wrists, and ankles when performing activities that stir up caterpillar hairs such as mowing, raking, weed whacking, and removing pupal webbing.
  - Perform these tasks on damp days or spray down vegetation with a hose. The moisture helps keep the hairs from becoming airborne while working.

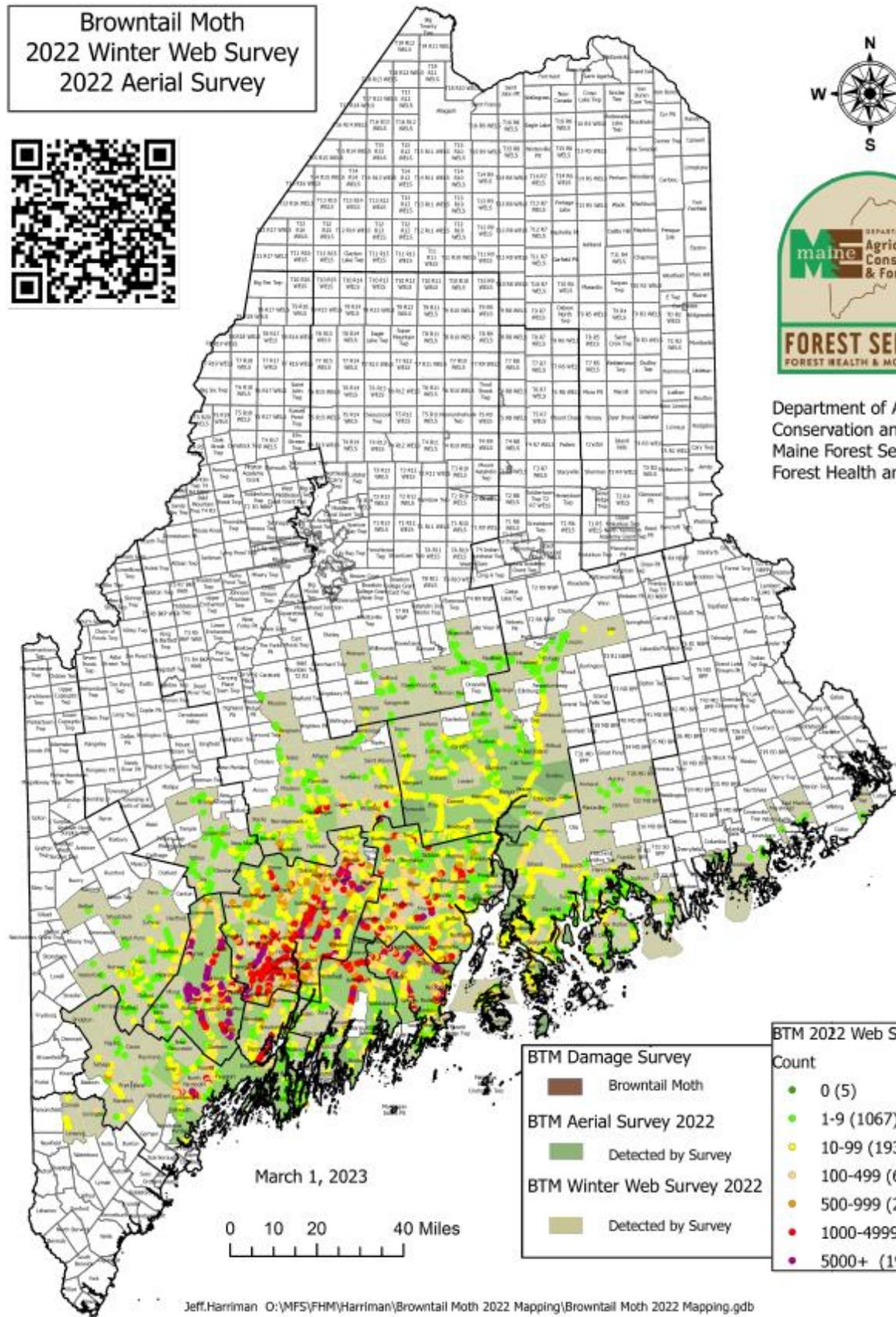
**For more information:**

- Contact 211 Maine for answers to frequently asked questions on browntail moths:
  - Dial 211 (or 207-874-2211)
  - Text your zip code to 898-211
- Maine CDC Browntail Moth Webpage: [www.maine.gov/dhhs/browntailmoth](http://www.maine.gov/dhhs/browntailmoth)
- Maine Forest Service Browntail Moth Webpage: [www.maine.gov/dacf/knockoutbtm](http://www.maine.gov/dacf/knockoutbtm)

**Browntail Moth  
2022 Winter Web Survey  
2022 Aerial Survey**



Department of Agriculture,  
Conservation and Forestry  
Maine Forest Service  
Forest Health and Monitoring



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