

“Woolly Bear Caterpillars”

by Sally Cureton

October is a good month to see Woolly Bear caterpillars crossing the road or taking a stroll down the sidewalk. A 1½ inch caterpillar, it is actually the larval form of the Isabella tiger moth. A medium-sized moth with yellow-orange and cream colored wings spotted with black, the Isabella is found from northern Mexico, throughout the United States and across the southern third of Canada. While the caterpillar is fun to look at and interesting to many people, the moth that it matures into is not nearly as remarkable in appearance.

All you need do is to pick up a Woolly Bear, to know that they do not actually feel much like wool. That supposedly woolly stuff is actually short, stiff bristles of hair called setae, all about the same length. As with other caterpillars, woolly bears, hatch during warm weather from eggs laid by the female moth. They spend their time feeding on various kinds of vegetation from weeds to garden plants. As they mature and fall comes, it is time to look for some place to spend the winter months. Typically they will head under a loose piece of bark or inside rock or log cavity. Then in the spring they will spin a fuzzy cocoon and emerge after a few weeks as a full-grown Isabella tiger moth.

Generally the bands at each end of the Woolly Bear caterpillar are black and the one in the middle is orange or brown. These bands can and do turn different colors - they will be yellow, black, gray or cinnamon-brown, depending the age of the caterpillar. As it ages, the bands become completely orange. This color change indicates that the caterpillar is approaching the time to enter the pupa stage of its life.

Woolly Bears first came to people's attention in the late 1600's when farmers were looking for something to help them predict the weather. At that time there were reports about the weather along with a comparison of woolly bear stripes. So people began to think that this sounded like a good predictor. The theory was and is that the wider the middle brown section is the milder the coming winter will be. Therefore, a narrow brown band means a harsh winter is ahead. Today most scientists discount this premise as folklore, but people still have fun with the concept. Elementary school classes make woolly bear forecasting into science projects. Outdoor columnists will compare woolly bear forecasts against other predictions. A unique critter that makes a walk in the woods a little more interesting for all of us.

