

GUM LEAF SKELETONISER A NEW PEST TO NEW ZEALAND

What is gum leaf skeletoniser?

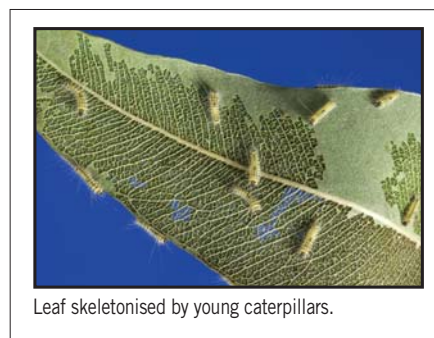
Gum leaf skeletoniser is an Australian insect (*Uraba lugens*) that causes damage mainly to gum (eucalypt) trees by eating the foliage. The young caterpillars "skeletonise" gum leaves by eating the softer parts of the leaves, avoiding the veins. Older larvae are capable of eating whole leaves, thus increasing damage. Repeated defoliation can slow tree growth or, in severe cases, kill individual trees.

Gum leaf skeletoniser was first detected in New Zealand in 1992 in Tauranga, where it was eradicated. The accidentally-introduced pest was later detected in Auckland in 2001. Gum leaf skeletoniser is now widespread in the greater Auckland region.

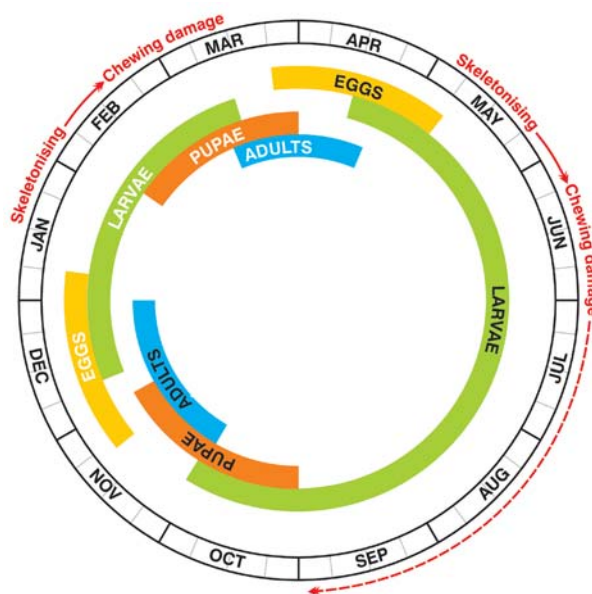
Life cycle of the gum leaf skeletoniser

This diagram shows the lifecycle of the gum leaf skeletoniser in the warmer regions of New Zealand where it is currently resident. The green sections of this diagram indicate the periods when gum leaf skeletoniser can become a problem to forest growers and the general public.

In a warm climate, the insect can complete two life cycles per year, one in summer and one in winter. In colder regions it is likely that only one batch of eggs will be laid per year during the late-summer period, and caterpillars will feed slowly through the winter months.



Leaf skeletonised by young caterpillars.



THE THREAT

Gum leaf skeletoniser defoliates eucalypt trees. The caterpillars' hairs can cause itching or a rash on skin if touched. People handling affected plants should wear protective clothing.

March 2006



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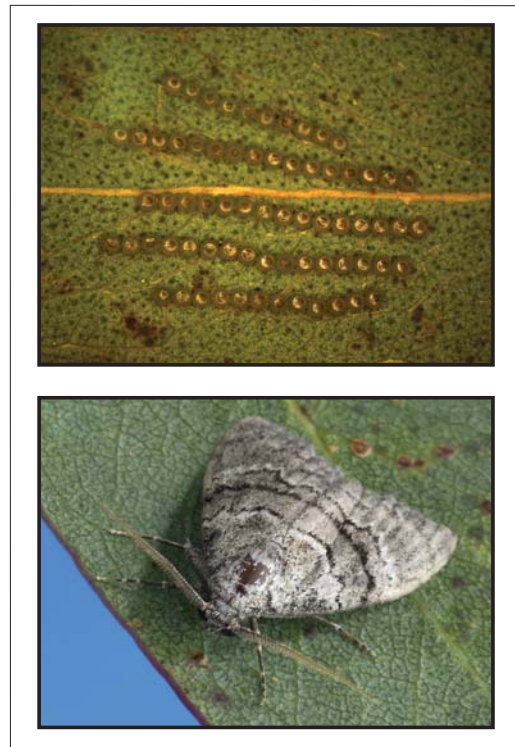
When to look for gum leaf skeletoniser

Gum leaf skeletoniser causes damage when caterpillars hatch and begin to feed on foliage. Chewing damage will become visible during January-March and May-September.

The larvae from each egg batch feed in close proximity to where the eggs were laid. This leads to distinctive damage patches in the canopy, with several leaves showing the characteristic skeletonised pattern. Caterpillars have long hairs on their body and a distinctive "hat" on their head, so they can be easily identified.

The egg masses are laid in neat, parallel rows on the leaves during December and April. This distinguishes them from Spodoptera (tropical army worm), which lay similar eggs in clusters.

You are most likely to see the gum leaf skeletoniser in its caterpillar form, since the adult moth is silvery-grey with no distinguishing features to the untrained eye. Equally, the pupae are very well camouflaged and are usually hidden within the crevasses of bark, so they are rarely seen.



Gumleaf skeletoniser caterpillars have hairs that can cause itching or a rash on skin contact. If you find gum leaf skeletoniser caterpillars, avoid touching them.

Reducing the spread of this pest

The spread of gum leaf skeletoniser can be minimised by avoiding transportation of all bark or leaf material, particularly during October/November or February/March when the pupae are living in the bark.

If trees are suffering visible damage, or if there are more than about five egg batches on recently planted seedlings or saplings, then chemical control methods should be considered. The best time to spray is part way through the larval stage, with possible follow-up sprays required as the caterpillars mature.



Typical skin reaction following gum leaf skeletoniser sting.

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