

# GUM LEAF SKELETONISER

## WHAT RISK DOES IT POSE?

### 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. This accidentally-introduced insect is now widespread in the greater Auckland region, and has the potential to disperse throughout all areas of New Zealand where eucalypts will grow. For this reason, it is important to minimise the spread of the pest.

### Which tree species does it eat?

Gum leaf skeletoniser caterpillars have been recorded to feed on many of the eucalypt species growing in New Zealand. Some of the eucalypt likely to be attacked the most severely are *E. nitens*, *E. globulus*, *E. nicholii*, *E. obliqua* and *E. cinerea*.

Despite its reputation as a eucalypt specialist, gum leaf skeletoniser has also been found to live successfully on other related Australian trees, such as *Lophostemon*. The insect also thrives on silver birch (*Betula pendula*), and can damage some oak species, copper beech, and plum.

Gum leaf skeletoniser is not generally attracted to New Zealand native plants, but can feed on them when they are growing in very close proximity to eucalypts. In the rare case that caterpillars may occur on native species, damage is not usually significant. The majority of larvae hatching on the leaves of native plants will die within 2 weeks of feeding on the plant, or will attempt to move off in search of a more suitable host.



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



Gum leaf skeletoniser feeding on silver birch leaves

### How far is it likely to spread?

Gum leaf skeletoniser has the ability to survive throughout the North Island, up to the tree line, and in most of the South Island. The insect is unlikely to thrive in dry areas of Otago, and the Southern Alps, which are too cold. Areas of New Zealand that experience high levels of rainfall are unlikely to support gum leaf skeletoniser in significant numbers.

#### THE THREAT

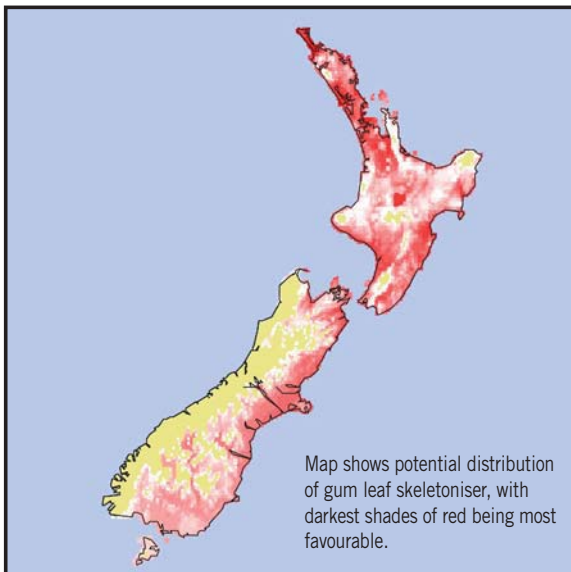
Gum leaf skeletoniser defoliates eucalypt trees. The caterpillars' hairs can cause itching or a rash on skin if touched. People handling affected plants should wear protective clothing.

March 2006



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## How much damage will it do?

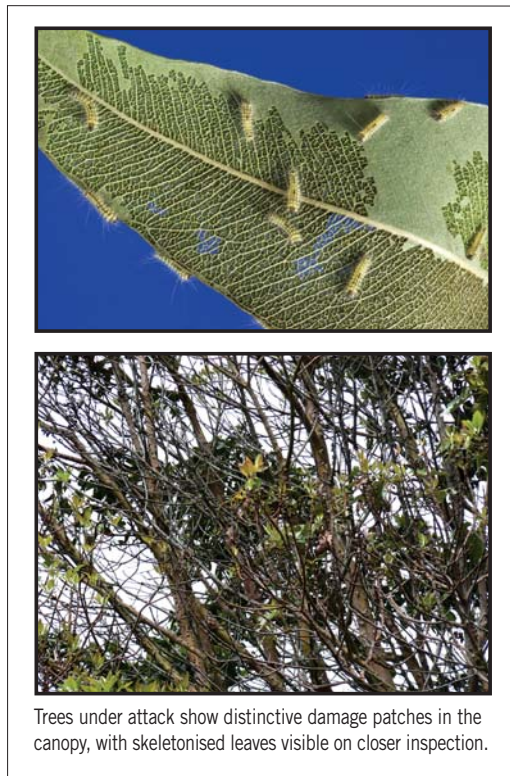
Gum leaf skeletoniser is a pest mainly to eucalypt trees.

In its native habitat of Australia, gum leaf skeletoniser is considered to be an outbreak species, generally surviving in the landscape in low numbers but occasionally causing severe damage to plantations.

Populations of gum leaf skeletoniser are expected to behave in a similar manner in New Zealand. Insect populations within hardwood plantations could increase to damaging levels following two good seasons for larval survival, for example a moderate winter, combined with a calm, dry summer. In an outbreak situation, caterpillar numbers could increase rapidly, since the New Zealand environment is relatively free from natural enemies.

Field surveys in Australia suggest that the pattern of damage caused by gum leaf skeletoniser will largely occur around the edge of plantations (approx. a 50 m zone). Young eucalypt plantations up to the age of 7 years appear most suitable for the insect. Repeated defoliation of very young trees can have a significant impact on wood production at the end of the rotation.

In older stands where there is canopy closure, the incidence of gum leaf skeletoniser is markedly reduced. Because of the usual open habit of amenity (street) plantings, trees older than 7 years may be defoliated.



Trees under attack show distinctive damage patches in the canopy, with skeletonised leaves visible on closer inspection.

## How can you protect your trees?

Forest managers are advised to monitor for the presence of gum leaf skeletoniser in hardwood plantations. Signs of chewing damage will become visible when the larvae are feeding, between the months of January-March and May-September. If you find caterpillars, avoid touching them, as their hairs can cause a skin reaction.

If trees are suffering defoliation, chemical control methods can be used. In plantation forestry areas, spraying with Btk, or synthetic pyrethroids will provide effective control. Where overall foliar spraying is not appropriate, such as in some urban situations, individual trees can be successfully treated using stem injection methods.

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.

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