

# Identifying pests in Tasmania's forests: information sheet 4

## Gum leaf skeletoniser

Scientific name: *Uraba lugens*

Order: **LEPIDOPTERA** (Moths and Butterflies)

### **Characteristic damage**

Caterpillars partly or completely skeletonise leaves on many eucalypt species.

**Severe damage:** all leaves on the trees turn brown and die after being skeletonised (Fig. 1).



Figure 1. Severe damage to a small eucalypt

**Less severe damage:** leaves on one or more lower branches turn brown and die (Fig. 2).

Damage is most serious on trees 1 - 3 years old but branches on older trees are also attacked. The caterpillars cause minor damage every winter and spring to many trees but in some years they occur in outbreak proportions in local areas.



Figure 2. Close-up of larvae on damaged shoot

### **Trees most at risk**

**Gums** are the most susceptible: *E. nitens* and *E. globulus*.

**Ash species** are also attacked: *E. regnans*, *E. obliqua*, and *E. delegatensis*. Young *E. sieberi* in native forest is particularly susceptible.

### **Effect on the trees**

Severe skeletonising may kill small trees, particularly if it occurs in more than one season; less severe damage or defoliation in only one season slows growth and may reduce wood production for several seasons after the damage.

**Time of damage:** Late winter, spring and summer; July - January.



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## **The insect**

**Eggs:** tightly packed rows or rafts of 50 - 1000 tiny, sculptured, metallic brown eggs are laid on the upper surface of outside leaves of the lower canopy within 5 m of the ground (Fig. 3), from February through to September; they start hatching in June.



Figure 3. Gum leaf skeletoniser eggs (twice life-size)

**Larvae:** cream and brown caterpillars, covered with long, prickly white hairs and a distinctive black hat of moulted head capsules, feed for five to eight months and grow up to 2.5 cm long (Figs. 4 and 5). When fully grown they pupate under the bark or in litter under the trees.



Figure 4. Gum leaf skeletoniser larvae just hatched from eggs (life-size)



Figure 5. Older gum leaf skeletoniser larvae (about life-size)

**Adult moths** are light grey with dark patterns, about 1 cm long, but rarely seen; they emerge in late summer and start laying eggs in February.

## **Controlling damage**

### **Natural control**

The larvae are parasitised by small wasps and flies that emerge from the pupae. Removing leaves with egg batches or young larvae by hand will reduce the damage, especially of small trees. **DO NOT TOUCH** the larvae or their hairy moult skins because they cause severe skin irritation.

### **Chemical control**

No insecticides are registered specifically for gum leaf skeletoniser but most broad spectrum insecticides will kill it, including Dominex®, a synthetic pyrethroid, which is registered in Tasmania to control the Tasmanian *Eucalyptus* leaf beetle on eucalypts. However, it also kills most other insects including the natural enemies. Refer to entomology staff in Forestry Tasmania for when and how to control outbreaks.