

The Truth about Dogs and Cats in Spain

Pinetree Caterpillars: A Deadly foe for your pet



When the Spanish brought in pine trees from northern Europe to replenish their tree population, little did they know what else they were bringing. Along with the trees came the Pine Tree Caterpillars, minus their natural predators - the birds that can eat them.

As we drove along the countryside on the San Jose weekend, I was appalled at the number of spider-web looking bags hanging from these trees. I don't remember seeing as many as a child. These caterpillars were only a problem in our playground in the spring. If they fell on you from the tree, you might develop a skin rash. Now, as a veterinarian, I attach another meaning to them, one which almost spoiled my weekend. Seeing so many, I wondered if anything, was being done about them.

These caterpillars fall in clusters of hundreds from the bags in the trees and begin a migration across land. They get in place one behind the other and move in lines, which is why the Spanish have named them "Los Processionarios". They are blackish gray with yellow hairs that emit a terribly caustic acid, reminding me of the acid from the movie Alien!

Over the years, I have treated pets that have crossed their path. As dogs usually keep their noses to the ground, they come across the cluster and when the acid stings their nose or tongue, the animal fights back by biting at them. In response, the caterpillars emit more acid and, unfortunately, the pet usually loses.

Cats usually find the caterpillars amusing to play with and bat them around, only to sting their pads and becoming angry, they then will go to bite them and even have been known to swallow them. What the owner sees is a pet that is frantic with pain, usually frothing and crying and often in a state of shock. The affected area should be washed abundantly with water and an icepack placed on it, and the animal raced to the nearest vet. We have seen pets with their tongue and lips burned so severely they eventually fall off, animals in such pain the owners opt for euthanasia, and in cases when it was less severe, pets who have to be hand fed for life after long-term intravenous fluid therapy. Of course, we also see pets that have recovered well with minimum damage after treatment. And in the best cases, pets who have walked in the area of the caterpillars and have painful pads but no severe damage.

Just a word to people: We've seen owners try to get the nests down from the trees and the caterpillars have fallen on them and caused a skin rash, or owners who have burned the nests and then had rashes, and even lung trouble from the smoke.

The caterpillars usually hatch at the first heat of spring and continue to be seen until the end of April. Fumigation companies can spray the trees in October for best results, killing the eggs, and if that hasn't been done, they can spray in March and April to kill most of the caterpillars. **For more information call: A.A.H. Veterinary Services at 91-357-4496.**

