

Woolly Bears

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Woolly bears (Figs. 1-4) are the larval or caterpillar forms of the tiger moth family (Arctiidae). Several species are common in the Northwest. Woolly bears are characterized as being somewhat attractive and among the more densely "haired" caterpillars in this area.

The most common of the woolly bears is the Isabella Tiger-moth, *Isia Isabella* (Fig. 2). The caterpillar form is easily recognized by its fuzziness and characteristic color pattern. Each end is clothed in dense black hairs and the middle third is rusty orange to yellow.

Every fall, these caterpillars may be seen in large numbers wandering over sidewalks, etc., in search of a protected spot in which to hibernate. Once achieving this, they pass the winter and pupate within a silken cocoon the following spring. The caterpillar form feeds on a variety of herbaceous plants, including grasses and weeds. They particularly are fond of narrow leafed plantains, a common weed found in lawns. These caterpillars are not known to feed extensively on any of our domestic yard or garden plants.

Some people have had reactions to the hairs of these caterpillars ranging from allergies to rashes. In one case, a hair got into the eyeball of a child who had been playing with one of the caterpillars. The hair had to be surgically removed from the eyeball. It is not the intention of the author to discourage childhood curiosity for insects, but rather to encourage parents to teach children to handle fuzzy or hairy insects by allowing them to walk onto a stick or other objects rather than onto bare hands.



Fig. 1. A webworm or woolly bear in defense posture. By A.L. Antonelli



Fig. 2. Our common banded woolly bear, *Isia Isabella*. By A.L. Antonelli.



**Fig. 3. The yellow woolly bear.
By K. Grey.**



**Fig. 4. Salt marsh caterpillar.
Author unknown.**