

Woolly Caterpillars

Woolly caterpillars, sometimes called Woolly bears, are loved by children and adults alike. These fuzzy larvae receive their common name from the hair-like bristles that cover their bodies.



The most famous midwestern woolly caterpillar is the **Banded Woolly Bear**. Well known for its brown middle band and black terminal bands, Banded Woolly Bear caterpillars are the larval stage of the Isabella Tiger moth. These little insects are famous for their fictional meteorological skills. The old wives' tale deduces that when a woolly bear has a thick brown band the coming winter will be mild, whereas if it has a thin brown band the winter will be harsh. Banded Woolly Bears are often found toward the end of the summer and the beginning of fall which helps to perpetuate the weather-predicting myth, but these small insects can be found as early as May when the first of two broods hatch for the year.

There are some species of woolly caterpillars that are mistaken for Banded Woolly Bears including the larval form of the Giant Leopard Moth. These woolly caterpillars have black bristles from head to abdomen with red segments in-between. Like the Banded Woolly bears, these caterpillars survive winter in their larval form.



To Touch or Not to Touch?

Some species of woolly caterpillars, such as the **Milkweed Tussock moth caterpillar**, get a bad reputation for “stinging” people. Their hair-like bristles look very inviting to children but can cause skin irritation and even rashes if the caterpillar bristles penetrate the skin. If you or a child want to take a closer look at a woolly caterpillar, slide a leaf in front of its path to pick it up safely and then return it to nature when you are finished.



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