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CLIPPINGS

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For Immediate Release

Can Woolly Caterpillars Predict Weather?

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One of the joys of cleaning and shutting down the flower beds in the fall is finding and holding a woollybear caterpillar in your hand. It's amazing how something so small can be so warm and fuzzy.

There are actually eight species of fuzzy, bristly haired woollybear caterpillars. But, the one that most people think of is the banded woollybear. This particular kind is found only in the U.S., Mexico and Canada. This caterpillar is covered with dense, bristly hair and is black at both ends and light reddish in the middle.



*Banded Woollybear Caterpillar
Photo by Laura Jesse Iles*

Banded woollybears are the caterpillar stage of the Isabella moth, which has white wings scattered with black spots. This moth is not large, having a wingspan of only about two inches.

It is the banded woollybear caterpillar that intrigues me. In the fall, they can be found crossing the road or under dead plant debris where they will spend the winter as a larva. In the spring, they feed briefly before changing into a cocoon and eventually a moth.

So, can they predict weather? A common myth is that the length of the black bands can foretell what the coming winter will be like. According to folklore, the longer these black segments, the harsher the coming winter weather will be.

But, in another respect, maybe they hold clues to previous weather. There is year-to-year variation in the amount of black hair on banded woollybears. This difference is caused by age and wetness. Older caterpillars have more black than younger ones.

And, caterpillars that fed and grew in areas where the fall weather was wetter have more black hair compared with caterpillars from drier areas. So, when you are out and about this fall, check out the woolly bear caterpillar. It might just be able to tell you what fall was like in Northwest Iowa!