

# A Closer Look at the Woolly Worm

**by Jim Thompson**

What is small, furry looking and found crossing roads this time of year?

The answer, of course, is the woolly worm. This perennial little critter is a familiar site in the fall, and it is not uncommon to see dozens if not hundreds in one day.

The woolly worm, in fact, is so common that it is easy to forget how complex and amazing the wee beasties truly are.

First off, the woolly worm is not a worm at all - they are caterpillars, the larva of the Isabella tiger moth. The name "worm" has stuck, at least in the South. People in New England and the Midwest call them "woolly bears."

Here are some interesting facts about the woolly ones:

When disturbed, the worms curl into a tight ball, with their "fur" (more about that later) bristling.

The worm has 13 segments to its body, which traditional forecasters say correspond to the 13 weeks of winter.

Woolly worms have three sets of legs, one each on its first three segments. There are some "false legs" behind those (non-working ones), and a leg for propping in the back.

Scientists don't believe the worms have weather forecasting powers. They argue the varying colors are caused by temperature levels and, possibly, moisture, during the early days of their life. Of course, over the last 20 years the worms have an 85 percent record for accuracy. Maybe the scientists are jealous.

Woolly worms eat plants such as grass, clover, dandelion, spinach and cabbage.

There are two generations of worms each year. The first appear in June and July, the second in September. It is the second generation that are the "weather prophets."

Where are the woolly worms racing when they cross a road? They are looking for places to hide. As cold weather arrives, they curl up under boards, logs, boulders and other safe places.

Here is something truly remarkable. Once settled in, the worms hibernate, creating a natural organic antifreeze. They freeze bit by bit, until everything but the interior of their cells are frozen. They can - and do - survive to temperatures as low as -90F.

This ability to adapt to cold shows up particularly in the Arctic, where the woolly worms live in a strange state of slow motion. Most caterpillars live for two to four weeks before becoming moths. The Arctic woolly worms, however, spend at least 14 years in the process!

The woolly worm we see now will winter over and emerge as moths in May. They will then lay eggs - the summer, or first, generation - and die.

Woolly worms have very tiny eyes, and limited range of sight. That is why sometimes you will see them rearing up, possibly mid-race, to feel around and seek out, by touch, the next place to go.