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This fuzzy rusty-brown and black caterpillar is actually the larval form of the attractive Isabella tiger moth, and like many other tiger moth variety larvae, it is covered in stiff, hairy bristles. Typically, Isabella tiger moth eggs hatch in the fall, and so it is the season we most often encounter the woolly bear.

The plump caterpillar is not a picky eater. Known as a *generalist feeder*, it consumes a wide variety of plants, like dandelion, nettle and plantain. It prefers the leaves of most plants, as well as select tree foliage. While nocturnal, it is not exclusively so, as a woolly bear – or 2 or 3 – ambling across the road in broad daylight is a common sight. If you stop to pick up a woolly bear, it will curl into a defensive position and remain motionless. Although it is not a toxic caterpillar in any way, people with sensitive skin who handle a woolly bear may get an itchy rash from the bristles.

As autumn progresses and temperatures start to dip, the woolly bear searches for a protected place in a hollow log, under a rock or in another safe nook. There it goes into hibernation for the winter, able to survive temperatures as low as -67.7 degrees Celsius (-90 degrees Fahrenheit)! The caterpillar may freeze, but its soft tissues and organs remain protected thanks to natural “antifreeze” produced in its body. With spring’s arrival, the caterpillar thaws out, awakens and goes on a feeding bonanza, before finally spinning a cocoon from its own hair. The finished cocoon looks like a small, fuzzy egg. In 10-15 days, the adult Isabella tiger moth emerges, with vibrant yellow-orange wings and dark spots on its body.

Age-old folklore claims that the woolly bear caterpillar can be used to predict the severity of the coming winter based on its 13 distinct rusty and black segments, or bands. The wider the rust-coloured bands, the milder the winter, while thicker black bands mean a harsh season ahead. Back in 1948, Dr. C.H. Curran, curator of insects at the American Natural History in New York City, decided to study this popular legend. Traveling an hour north to Bear Mountain State Park, he and his wife collected a bunch of caterpillars in one day. Of these specimens, Curran noted a larger average of rusty bands over black. He then predicted the coming winter would be mild, and his forecast was printed in the New York Herald Tribune. When the winter turned out to be a mild one, the subsequent publicity launched the woolly bear into rock star status. It became one of our most recognized caterpillar species, along with the monarch. Although Curran continued his informal study for the next 8 years, he was never able to scientifically prove that the woolly bear could accurately predict winter weather; and while he concluded that the folklore carried some merit, most scientists discount the legend.

This fall, why not take note yourself of any woolly bears you encounter. Are the rusty bands thicker or (horrors!) are there more black bristles? Jot down your observations, and make a prediction based on the data you collect. If you spot an ALL-black caterpillar, do not fear! This is a different species altogether, thank goodness!

Margie is a self-proclaimed nature nerd with a passion for all things finned, furred and feathered...even the creepy-crawly-scaly kinds. She's summured on Wolfe Lake since childhood and loves sharing what she learns about our wild things.