

Max and the Hairy Caterpillars

A Children's Story from the George Haddock Track by John Sinclair

Over Easter, Max experienced Fraser Island for his first time. He found everything fascinating. He loved swimming in the lakes and in the sea. He also loved trying out the tomahawk that had been freshly sharpened to cut out the small regrowth of trees along the walking track.

Max's parents had taken him and his brother to work on a track-clearing project as volunteers. Over that Easter weekend, Max and his family had enjoyed many adventures. They saw many interesting places from beautiful lakes and rainforest to relics of an ancient forest drowned when sea levels rose. However it was the little things that attracted Max's attention.

"What is this?" Max asked his father as he pointed at a ball of wriggling hair, the size of a cricket ball. He found the wriggling mass under the leaf litter when he pulled out some of the regrowth that they didn't want growing up in the path.

"Don't touch them!" his father shouted in alarm. "They are a bunch of Hairy Caterpillars that if they come into contact with any part of your body you will be very itchy for a long time. They can cause dermatitis. That is sometimes why they are called Itchy Grubs and why we leave them alone."



The Hairy Caterpillars were wrapped up in a ball as one of their survival mechanisms when Max first found them

Max was very curious about these Itchy Grubs or Hairy Caterpillars but he wisely didn't touch them.

Later on he came across some other Hairy Caterpillars. This time though they were very hairy and they were strung out like a long string across the track in single file with each one following the other. It was like watching a long mini-train with hundreds of wagons hooked up to each other. His dad confirmed that these were the same kind of Hairy Caterpillars.

"Each caterpillar lays out a fine trail of silk as it walks. The next caterpillar follows this silk trail nose to tail. They are famous for walking in processions and this is why they are sometimes also called Processionary Caterpillars," Max's dad told him.

Max was a naturally mischievous boy. He wanted to see what would happen if the silk threads were broken. He picked up a twig and dragged it through the very long procession. The result was instant. All of the caterpillars at the back of the line didn't go past the break. Instead they just clustered into a ball while the front end of the very long procession just kept marching on unaware that half the mass has been left behind to curl up into a ball.

It was autumn and each caterpillar was about four centimetres long. Max dared not touch them after learning how notorious they were for causing irritating rashes. Max later discovered that this army had eaten out one wattle tree and were seeking another so that they could finish growing before going underground to pupate.



The nose to tail procession walks across the Fraser Island sand seeking another wattle to consume. When Max broke the line of the procession, those at the back had no one to follow so they formed themselves up into a small ball.

"We only usually see these hairy caterpillars in late summer or autumn," Max's Dad said. "They eventually become Bag Shelter Moths in late Spring but when they do they will live only a few days, eat nothing, mate and lay eggs so that another batch of Hairy Caterpillars will emerge early the next summer," he added.

Max was so interested in the peripatus and the Hairy Caterpillars he saw that when he got home from Fraser Island he searched the internet to find out as much as he could about these of unusual creatures.

He discovered as much as he could about the Bag-shelter Moth, *Ochrogaster lunifer* and its year-long life cycle. He was also keen to know more about the behaviour of their caterpillars that were densely covered with long, pale hairs and caused so much itchiness if touched.

There were many things that Max learnt on his first visit to Fraser Island, but he will never forget the fascinating Hairy Caterpillars he discovered that Autumn.