

## News Article

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## Are Woolly Worms Winter Weather Forecasters?

Almost everyone has heard the folklore about woolly worms – the darker and fuzzier they are, the worse the weather is supposed to be in the coming winter. Conversely, the more brown, orange or copper red, the milder the winter should be. What about this folklore? Should it be taken as fact, fiction, or somewhere in-between?



First of all, human meteorologists have a tough job. They deal with forecasting models, probabilities, and other data sources as they make forecasts. Sometimes they are right on, sometimes they are way off, and sometimes it's somewhere in-between.

With that in mind, should we ascribe a prophet-like quality to woolly worms? The short answer is a definite, "No."

Woolly worms are actually called woolly bear caterpillars. According to the *Old Farmer's Almanac*, woolly bear caterpillar lore began in 1948, when Dr. C. H. Curran, curator of insects at the American Museum of Natural History in New York City, began studying the caterpillars. Over the course of eight years he captured, measured and documented relative colors of woolly bear caterpillars and tried to associate upcoming winter conditions with the color patterns. He would forecast the coming winter weather through a reporter friend of his at *The New York Herald Tribune*. Woolly bear caterpillars became North America's most recognizable caterpillar.

In recent years, Banner Elk, North Carolina, has hosted an annual "Woolly Worm Festival" each October, highlighted by a caterpillar race. Vermillion, Ohio also hosts a "Woollybear Festival" annually.

The woolly worm featured in these festivals has the 'official' common name of banded woolly bear. Other common names used for this caterpillar include the black-ended bear and fuzzy wuzzy. They pupate in the spring and emerge as moths with yellow-brown wings and black dots. The moths are named either woolly bear caterpillar moth, banded woollybear moth or Isabella tiger moth.

Before we get too warm and fuzzy about festivals and folklore, let's review some facts about woolly worms.

Dr. Tim Gibb, Purdue entomologist and author of the popular column and podcast, “Dr. Tim’s Spineless Wonders,” recently wrote that folklore has it that the orange and black-banded woolly bears we are seeing on the roads right now can actually predict the severity of the approaching winter. “The legend says the coming winter will be cold **IF** the woolly bear has a narrow, orange middle band, and the winter will be warm if the band is wide,” he said. “Certainly one would have to know what is normal, and what is not, to compare against but apparently there are actual studies that have measured the average differences in band width from year to year.” He said the studies concluded that there are in fact differences in average band widths from year to year but — sorry, folks — the studies failed to demonstrate a significant correlation with the coming weather.

“They won’t really care about what we humans call a cold or a warm winter,” he added. “They sleep through it either way.”

There is one forecast you can count on, however: when you see woolly worms in the fall, winter will soon be upon us. Additionally, it will probably be cold at some point, and we may even have some snow!