# Thousands of invasive ash sawfly larvae rain down on Belfast, threatening local trees



In recent weeks, residents of Belfast have reported thousands of invasive ash sawfly larvae raining down from ash trees across the city, especially in the Twinbrook area. Known for their striking lime-green hue, these caterpillars have become a significant concern as they voraciously feed on the leaves of ash trees—one of Ireland's most common hedgerow trees, second only to hawthorn. The larvae's feeding habits can lead to complete defoliation, ultimately stunting the growth of these vital trees. Ash trees are not only crucial for local wildlife but also play a role in traditional crafts, being used to make items like hurls.

Michael McCorry, the community outreach projects coordinator for Belfast City Council, observed a sudden explosion in the caterpillar population this year. “I noticed one tree last year in Twinbrook, but this year there’s about 20 trees – it has really exploded,” he remarked. He further described how children in the area have found themselves covered in the crawling creatures as they drop from the trees. While some of the caterpillars have fallen prey to local birds, McCorry noted that the predation has not significantly reduced their numbers.

Dr. Archie Murchie from the Agri-Food and Biosciences Institute (AFBI) explained that the ash sawflies are "eating machines" thriving in Belfast's environment due to the absence of their natural predators and parasites. This particular invasive species, which was first recorded in the Belvoir estate in 2016, is believed to have spread from Scotland during an outbreak in Aberdeen. The larvae’s incredible growth rates have been exacerbated this year by an unusually warm and dry spring, accelerating their life cycle and resulting in rapid defoliation.

Monitoring of ash sawflies has been ongoing since their introduction to Northern Ireland, with specialists like Dr. Florentine Spaans noting that they have also been discovered in regions such as County Meath and Dublin. The lack of predators in their new environment has allowed the population to thrive unchecked. Dr. Spaans suggested that the sawfly larvae typically come from infected foliage that can be inadvertently transported by people. “Somebody could have got in the car at the wrong time, taken a bunch of flies with them and then crossed in the ferry and arrived in Belfast – as easy as that,” she explained.

Although the infestation can lead to significant leaf loss, the long-term impact on tree health remains uncertain. Research indicates that while repeated annual damage could diminish tree vigour, strong and healthy specimens might withstand these assaults for years. Presently, experts advise against chemical interventions, instead recommending monitoring and manual removal of the larvae as strategies to mitigate the issue.

The rapid spread of the ash sawfly, combined with existing threats such as ash dieback disease—which has been affecting Ireland’s ash tree population since 2012—presents a multifaceted challenge for the future of these iconic trees. As urban areas like Belfast encounter this invasive species, the urgency for continued monitoring and understanding of these outbreaks grows, heralding a potential shift in the ecosystem balance that could leave lasting effects on the landscape.

## Reference Map:

* Paragraph 1 – [[1]](https://www.irishnews.com/news/northern-ireland/invasive-eating-machine-caterpillars-raining-down-in-belfast-V7TGGU27UJAUJKAOW5IUSDE6BM/), [[4]](https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-northern-ireland-65884272)
* Paragraph 2 – [[1]](https://www.irishnews.com/news/northern-ireland/invasive-eating-machine-caterpillars-raining-down-in-belfast-V7TGGU27UJAUJKAOW5IUSDE6BM/), [[2]](https://www.afbini.gov.uk/news/ash-sawflies-active-belfast-area), [[5]](https://muse.jhu.edu/article/868743)
* Paragraph 3 – [[3]](https://www.afbini.gov.uk/news/ash-sawfly-defoliation-ash-trees-ni), [[6]](https://www.farminglife.com/country-and-farming/watch-out-for-ash-sawfly-urges-afbi-3280415)
* Paragraph 4 – [[1]](https://www.irishnews.com/news/northern-ireland/invasive-eating-machine-caterpillars-raining-down-in-belfast-V7TGGU27UJAUJKAOW5IUSDE6BM/), [[6]](https://www.farminglife.com/country-and-farming/watch-out-for-ash-sawfly-urges-afbi-3280415), [[7]](https://www.afbini.gov.uk/news/afbi-ask-you-watch-out-ash-sawfly)

Source: [Noah Wire Services](https://www.noahwire.com)

## Bibliography

1. <https://www.irishnews.com/news/northern-ireland/invasive-eating-machine-caterpillars-raining-down-in-belfast-V7TGGU27UJAUJKAOW5IUSDE6BM/> - Please view link - unable to able to access data
2. <https://www.afbini.gov.uk/news/ash-sawflies-active-belfast-area> - The Agri-Food and Biosciences Institute (AFBI) reports that ash sawflies, a relatively new species to Ireland, were first recorded in 2016 in the Belvoir estate, Belfast. These insects cause defoliation of ash trees, with larvae feeding on leaves and potentially leading to complete leaf loss. While only one generation occurs annually, the impact of initial defoliation on tree health remains uncertain. AFBI is monitoring the spread and impact of this species, including its relationship with ash dieback disease and potential natural predators.
3. <https://www.afbini.gov.uk/news/ash-sawfly-defoliation-ash-trees-ni> - AFBI has received reports of ash sawfly infestations causing severe defoliation of ash trees, particularly along the Lagan Valley area. The larvae, Tomostethus nigritus, were first observed in Northern Ireland in 2016. While defoliation is rarely fatal, repeated annual damage may affect tree vigour. Factors such as flooding, mild winters, and absence of predators may influence outbreak occurrences. AFBI advises against chemical control at this stage and suggests monitoring and manual removal of larvae to reduce future infestations.
4. <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-northern-ireland-65884272> - An invasive insect species, the ash sawfly, is threatening ash trees in Northern Ireland. First identified in 2016, the larvae feed on leaves, leading to complete defoliation. Infestations have been reported from Belfast to County Meath. The sawfly's spread is attributed to factors like climate change and imported soil. Experts warn that the sawfly, combined with ash dieback disease, could severely impact ash tree populations. Preventative measures and understanding outbreak causes are essential to mitigate the threat.
5. <https://muse.jhu.edu/article/868743> - The article discusses the presence of ash sawflies, particularly Tomostethus nigritus, in Europe, including Ireland. These insects deposit eggs on ash leaves, and larvae feed on them until early summer, then pupate in the soil. While not considered serious pests in mainland Europe, changing climate conditions may lead to larger outbreaks causing excessive defoliation. The first recorded observation of T. nigritus in Ireland was in Belfast in 2016, with subsequent reports of defoliation in South Belfast in 2017.
6. <https://www.farminglife.com/country-and-farming/watch-out-for-ash-sawfly-urges-afbi-3280415> - AFBI urges vigilance against the ash sawfly, a new species to Ireland first recorded in Belvoir, Belfast, in 2016. The sawfly has spread throughout the greater Belfast area and reports extend to County Kildare. Dr. Archie Murchie of AFBI notes the rapid spread along the Lagan towpath. While the sawfly can cause sporadic damage in other regions, Belfast trees are experiencing year-on-year defoliation, potentially stunting growth. The absence of natural predators may contribute to the sawfly's unchecked proliferation.
7. <https://www.afbini.gov.uk/news/afbi-ask-you-watch-out-ash-sawfly> - AFBI and DAERA are monitoring the spread of the ash sawfly, first recorded in Belvoir, Belfast, in 2016. The sawfly has spread throughout the greater Belfast area, with reports from as far as County Kildare. Dr. Archie Murchie highlights the rapid spread along the Lagan towpath. While the sawfly can cause sporadic damage in other regions, Belfast trees are experiencing year-on-year defoliation, potentially stunting growth. The absence of natural predators may contribute to the sawfly's unchecked proliferation.