

Hemlock woolly adelgid can fell N.S. giants: advocates

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Group to raise awareness through calendar campaign



In nature, sometimes all it takes is the smallest organism to take out what would otherwise be considered a giant. This is certainly true of the hemlock woolly adelgid (HWA). This minute insect, which is less than 1.5 millimetres long, can effectively wipe out an entire forest of massive hemlock trees — and all in a matter of a few years.

“If this happened out here, for me personally, this would be an ecological disaster. This is hemlock country,” says Tom Rogers, a South Shore resident and concerned advocate for at-risk forests.

Rogers often garners inspiration while walking on his property, which is full of majestic hemlocks. And it was during one of these walks the idea to help to spread information about HWA came to him.

“I thought there is a role people have to play where HWA is concerned. The issue is HWA is very transportable, contagious. If you think of it as a virulent flu, people can spread it when they come into contact with it, and they can spread it very easily,” Rogers explains.

HWA was introduced into the State of Virginia from Japan around 1950 and it quickly spread across the northeastern U.S. The aphid-like insect, which kills hemlock trees by feeding on nutrient- and water-storage cells at the base of its needles, was first detected in Yarmouth, N.S. in mid-July 2017.

“In North Carolina, they have hemlock forests that have been completely wiped out in one fell swoop — just five years from start to finish,” which is why he is so determined to bring awareness to what may be an inevitably expanding infestation here.

Hemlock trees are vital to a healthy ecosystem — they are considered ‘foundation trees.’ The eastern hemlock is found in Ontario, east to the Maritimes and throughout the Canadian Shield. These fragrant trees live on the shores of lakes and rivers and have an important impact on the regulation of water temperatures — in the summer, their canopies shade streams and cool the water, making it habitable for brook trout. In winter, hemlocks provide a necessary thermal cover for deer and birds.

“HWA can be transmitted as simply as someone grabbing firewood from the back of their house because they don’t want to pay for wood while camping, and then putting it in the back of their car and going to Keji. If the wood is infected, it can then infect the entire Keji area, which has a ton of Hemlocks,” Rogers says.

Hemlocks are typically slow-growing and can reach as high as 80 feet and spread a massive 25 to 30 feet in circumference, which makes the death of any one of these ancient trees significant, according to Rogers.

“So, my thinking was how do we put a positive spin on what could be a pretty nasty situation. If we can show the diversity and the beauty of the entire province ... and not focus on a ‘disease’ or a ‘problem,’ but focus on this place, that is pretty special and worthy of us changing our actions to keep it that way, maybe we can make a real difference.”

And out of that thought, Rogers says he came up with the idea for a calendar that will depict the many beautiful trees across Nova Scotia. With a calendar, he says, people will be reminded every day of the beautiful trees throughout our province.

“There is a tree close to the 100 series highway near Shubenacadie. It is out in the middle of the field, right beside the river and people go nuts for that tree. There is a huge connection with this tree, and there is a huge outflowing of emotion ... and my sense is there is the same connection to places and trees all across the province.”

Although the project is called Giants of Nova Scotia, Rogers says he is taking a much broader view of ‘giants.’

“For example, I have one photograph looking down a trail with poplar trees in the fall. So, my interpretation of giants is more about an outstanding photograph of some part of Nova Scotia that includes trees and forests, but the photo is a giant,” Rogers says. “We want outstanding photos that have trees or forests in the composition. So, if the image itself is a giant, really, that is what we are looking for. If we are asking people to look at an image on a calendar for an entire month and, an ultimately an entire year, they need to be outstanding photos that portray how beautiful this place really is.”

Rogers will be accepting photo submissions for the calendar until Friday, Sept. 14, (winners announced Sept. 24) and he hopes to get photos that represent all four seasons. His goal for the calendar is twofold. “I hope to change people’s attitudes in a positive way — not beat them over the head — about the fragility of our forests. I also hope to raise money to fund further work in the field of how to essentially prevent HWA and other species that are invasive and a threat to our province.”

To do this, Rogers teamed up with the Mersey-Tobiatic Research Institute, a non-profit, co-operative research institute that operates a field station in Queens County. They are currently trying to spread awareness about HWA and Rogers hopes to help them do this by raising \$5,000 through the calendar, which he plans to have available by Oct. 31, in time to make the perfect Christmas present, he adds.

In the interim, Rogers says he has had enthusiastic feedback from everyone he approached about the idea. He started an Instagram page (www.instagram.com/giantsofnovascotia), for people to post their tree photos, and so far, he says they are “drop-dead-gorgeous photos from around the province by incredibly talented local photographers.” He hopes some of them will consider submitting them for the calendar.

As for the mighty HWA, Rogers says awareness is the first step is thwarting the insect. “My sense is that people want to help and this [calendar] is a way that they can do that.”

To learn more about the HWA, visit www.inspection.gc.ca (the agency that deals with HWA) or call 1-800-442-2342 if you think you have an infestation. For more information about Rogers’ HWA project, or to pre-order your calendar, visit www.giantsofnovascotia.com.