

SCIENTIST HAS WIGGLE ROOM FOR CONTEST



CLOSE SCRUTINY: University of Adelaide scientist Erin Fagan-Jeffries is studying how wasps reproduce inside caterpillars.

Picture: TRICIA WATKINSON

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LURKING inside many caterpillars is a colony of tiny wasps, quietly devouring their unsuspecting host.

It's a gory story that captivated University of Adelaide PhD student Erin Fagan-Jeffries, 25, who's studying the caterpillar killers.

"It's a case of really delving into something that hasn't been looked at, working out

how many species there are and documenting our biodiversity," she said.

Her infectious enthusiasm is spreading to a host of "citizen scientists", recruited to farm caterpillars in their own homes through The Caterpillar Conundrum project.

And it earned her a trip overseas with the British Council's FameLab, a world leading science communication competitions.

Ms Fagan-Jeffries will rep-

resent Australia in the international FameLab finals at *The Times* Cheltenham Science Festival, UK next Wednesday.

FameLab invites contestants to "explain a scientific concept to a general audience, in just three minutes".

Australia is one of 27 countries in the finals but has a good chance, Ms Fagan-Jeffries says, because "these are parasites most people have never heard of and you can really gross people out".

"Most people would be able to describe a butterfly life cycle, they know it's a caterpillar and then it's a cocoon and then it's a butterfly," she said.

"But probably not many people know about the fact that there are then these wasps, which have a similar life cycle, inside a caterpillar. Baby wasps hatch out of the eggs and then they eat the caterpillar and then they form a cocoon and then they turn into an adult wasp."

Using specialised netting tents, Ms Fagan-Jeffries has trapped and described new species of native wasps, but it's hard to know what caterpillar they came from.

"If we can get people to rear caterpillars and they get a wasp come out then we know what the wasp came out of," she said.

Join thecaterpillarconundrum.org or share your caterpillar stories by email to info@thecaterpillarconundrum.org.