

# Tent Caterpillar – They Are Back!

While many want to blame the gypsy moth, the most recent leaf feeding caterpillar that has taken much of northern Michigan by storm is really the Eastern Tent Caterpillar. If it makes a tent silk nest in the branches of trees then it is the tent caterpillar, not the gypsy moth.

The good news is the tent caterpillar is not as damaging to trees and not as annoying to humans as the gypsy moth. But the bad news is this is a large invasion of the tent caterpillars. Like all insects their populations grow in size for a few years and then crash and seem to disappear for five years or more. 2008 is seeing higher populations of tent caterpillars than what we have seen in the last fifteen years so they will still be noticeable and at least a little annoying for a few more weeks.

Eastern tent caterpillars generally attack understory trees, particularly crabapple, wild cherry, and apple, but also will feed on peach, pear, plum, rose, hawthorn, and others. The larvae often eat all the leaves off a tree. Although this damage is unsightly and worrisome, it usually only weakens the tree after three or more years of more than 50% defoliation.

They are a black, hairy caterpillar with white stripes with narrower brown and yellow line on the sides and blue spots. When full grown, they are about two inches long. Caterpillars are the only stage, which cause feeding damage. In early June these grown caterpillars leave the tree and crawl everywhere, seeking locations to make cocoons. After about six weeks of feeding and growing in mid-June the caterpillars spin white or yellowish white cocoons, about one inch in length. At this point as far as homeowners are concerned they virtually disappear for the summer.

Adults are reddish brown moths with stripes on the forewings and have a wingspan of 1" - 1 1/2". They emerge in July. The adults mate and females lay about 200 eggs in a ring around twigs, lying on a foamy secretion which dries to a

hard, protective shell. The eggs overwinter and hatch out as tiny larvae in early spring usually early to mid April. If you have potential tree hosts, careful observation and hand control may be all you need. In fall, winter, and early spring look for egg masses and cut or scrape them off and either burn or soak them in soapy water. In early spring, tear out nests by hand or with a garden tool and destroy the young caterpillars. This can be easily accomplished by dropping the nest parts and caterpillars in a pail or dishpan of soapy water. People often burn the nest out of the trees, but this method is not recommended because of the safety hazard.

There are several natural enemies of the tent caterpillar. A parasitic fly attacks full grown caterpillars. The fly looks like a housefly, but is twice as large, has a light gray thorax with three black stripes. The fly's maggot consume the caterpillar internally and kill it as a pup (cocoon). Ground beetles and predaceous wasps also eat tent caterpillars, as do various birds, most notably Northern orioles.

To protect and help increase the population of beneficial insects, broad spectrum spraying of insecticides is not advised. Instead the best time to spray the tent caterpillar is when they are still concentrated in their nests in May.

Insecticides with the chemical ingredients like Acephate, carbaryl (Sevin), malathion, and B.t. are the recommended insecticides. *Bacillus thuringiensis* (B.t.) is the most environmentally sound organic control method but it must be applied in May to be effective. If your trees have been defoliated, water and fertilize them. One inch of water, applied every one to two weeks is recommended if rainfall is not present.

By early July the tent caterpillar will be a distant memory that may not return in high numbers for many years, most trees they feed on will leaf back out and we will be able to worry about things like gas prices again.