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Forest Tent Caterpillar *

At roughly 10-year intervals hordes of migrating caterpillars like those illustrated in photo 1 make their appearance in various parts of Ontario. They are particularly prominent near forests containing sugar maple and oak in the south, and poplar in the north. Although they are called tent caterpillars they do not build silk tents.

Hordes of
migrating caterpillars

About the time that poplar leaves become visible, the tiny caterpillars emerge from the egg clusters that were laid the previous summer on small twigs on host trees. Feeding is not noticeable at first because the leaves are expanding rapidly. Later, however, as the larvae approach full size (3.5 cm), they eat much more, and may consume most of the leaves on the tree. At this time, usually mid-June, the black and blue-to-gray caterpillars wander a great deal and become a real nuisance. When they stop feeding they spin silken cocoons in any convenient place on trees and buildings, then change to moths in about two weeks. Following mating, the light brown moths lay approximately 150 eggs in bands encircling tree twigs, as shown in photo 2.

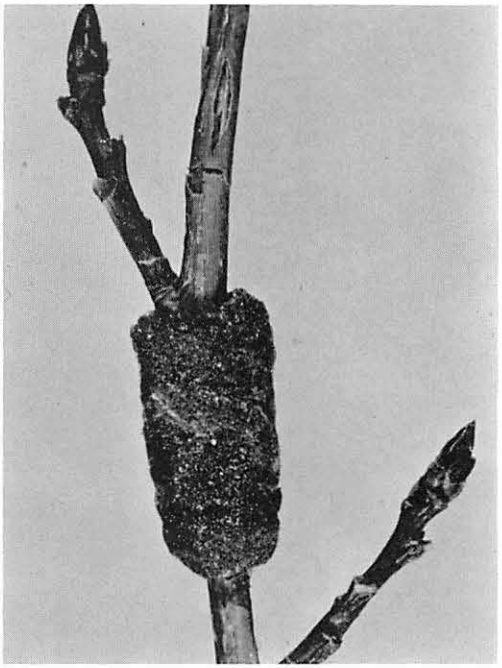
Even if the caterpillars eat all the leaves on a tree it does not mean that the tree will die. If all leaves are eaten the tree will put out a new crop in four to six weeks. However, widespread epidemics lasting two or three years can be a significant factor in the eventual decline and possible death of the trees, especially maple or oak. In fact, in a sugar bush, one year's defoliation may reduce sap production in the next year. These factors aside, the nuisance value of these caterpillars is always a consideration in any outbreak.

Control measures against the forest tent caterpillar should be taken early in the insect's development. Although removal of twigs containing egg bands before hatching occurs is the best method, this is possible only on relatively small trees. The next best approach is to apply insecticides as soon as possible after the eggs have hatched. The most selective and least harmful to the envi-

* *Malacosoma disstria* Hbn.

ronment are the biological (bacterial) insecticides which go under various trade names such as Thuricide, Chipman Biological Insecticide and Dipel. One or more of these are usually readily available. Three chemical insecticides are currently registered for use against the forest tent caterpillar. They are Sevin, Malathion and Methoxychlor, but the label on any product should be checked before purchase to be sure that it is registered for use and is effective against tent caterpillars. Because all insecticides are poisons, the manufacturers' directions should be followed exactly.

Large flies are often associated with forest tent caterpillar outbreaks, and to some people these are as great a nuisance as the caterpillars themselves. However, these flies are natural parasites of the tent caterpillar and hence are beneficial. They will disappear when the caterpillars have gone.



Egg cluster

The closely related eastern tent caterpillar, *Malacosoma americanum* F., which has a solid white line on its back, constructs silken tents on a variety of fruit trees. Although it is common in many areas, it never appears in migrating hordes as the forest tent caterpillar does.

To obtain identification of, and information on, other forest insects and diseases, send samples of the organism and its damage to the Forest Insect and Disease Survey Unit at the Great Lakes Forest Research Centre.

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Copies of this leaflet can be obtained from the Great Lakes Forest Research Centre's Information Office.

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