
New Hampshire
*Department of Agriculture,
Markets & Food*

PO Box 2042, Concord NH 03302-2042
(603) 271-3685 Fax: (603) 271-1109

Tent Caterpillars
By Tom Durkis, State Entomologist
Division of Plant Industry

Most New Englanders are familiar with the eastern tent caterpillar. It is a native insect pest that shows up early in the season by constructing conspicuous silken webs, usually in wild cherry, apple or crabapple trees. Webs appear to be less common along roadsides this spring. Those caterpillars that survived our cold wet spring are now crawling about looking for places to pupate. When eastern tent caterpillar numbers are low, we can often expect another roadside tent forming insect, the fall webworm to have much higher population levels. In another few months we'll know for certain whether or not this rule of thumb is accurate.

Yet another tent caterpillar, in name only, is the forest tent caterpillar. These insects don't actually construct tents or webs; rather, they form a silken mat on tree trunks where they congregate while at rest. It's been almost thirty years or so since the forest tent caterpillar has caused any significant defoliation in New Hampshire. They are a native insect pest that feeds on a variety of hardwood trees, particularly sugar maple, oak and aspen. Widespread outbreaks have been very uncommon here over the past thirty years. However, not so in our neighboring state of Vermont which last season had thousands of acres defoliated and this year anticipates spraying approximately 1500 acres to protect threatened sugar bushes. Fortunately, to date, we haven't experienced the same degree of defoliation as Vermont.

Outbreaks of this insect can begin suddenly but can likewise collapse quickly, usually due to natural causes. The cool wet spring that we have experienced has slowed caterpillar development and may ultimately induce disease. However, another common cause of population collapse is simply starvation, resulting from caterpillar feeding.

One more significant natural control is the buildup of native parasites of the forest tent caterpillar. Already large numbers of flies, looking like very large houseflies, were recently observed in small localized areas experiencing light to moderate forest tent caterpillar feeding. The female flies lay their larvae, known as maggots, on the forest tent caterpillars. These maggots feed upon the caterpillars and can be so numerous as to be responsible for the collapse of the forest tent population.

We're keeping our fingers crossed that mother nature will continue to keep this pest in check without having our forests experience any significant defoliation for at least another 30 or so years. Oh yes, surprisingly this pest along with the eastern tent caterpillar and fall webworm are sometimes misidentified as gypsy moth, an insect that doesn't construct webs or tents.

For more information, contact Piera Siegert by emailing piera.siegert@agr.nh.gov.

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