OAKLAND COUNTY PARKS

The Wilder Side of Oakland County

by Jonathan Schechter

Eastern Tent Caterpillar Emergence

Nature is full of wild, weird and sometimes misunderstood creatures. Tent caterpillars are near the top of that list when it comes to eye-catching insects that sometimes cause the "yuck factor". April showers brought May Flowers and set the scene for a dramatic emergence of Tent Caterpillars (Malacosoma americanum) in some locations. They are also now appearing in some parts of Oakland County and those sightings have sent questions my way.

The timing of questions was ideal because I was in Baldwin, MI a few weeks ago participating in the Michigan Outdoor Writer's Association conference and a major emergence of tent caterpillars; also known as an "outbreak"; was well underway there giving excellent photo opportunity. Of note, all my images of the caterpillars and their eye-catching webs in today's "The Wilder Side of Oakland County" were captured at that location about 170 miles northwest of Oakland County.

One of the questions was simple and direct, "Where did the caterpillars come from?". The answer was easy since tent caterpillars are a native Oakland County species and emerge in the spring, but their lifecycle is very short. They are sometimes confused with fall webworms which also appear in our county in autumn as the name indicates.

The University of New Hampshire Extension explains the differences between the two different species this way: "The Fall Webworm is frequently confused with the Eastern Tent Caterpillar. The dirty loosely-woven web of the fall webworm encloses branches; the larvae can be found feeding within this web. The web of the Eastern Tent Caterpillar, on the other hand, is thickly constructed in the forks and crotches of trees; the larvae do not feed within their webs, but congregate there at night and during rainy weather. Fall webworms occur in summer and fall, whereas eastern tent caterpillars appear in spring."

The immediate area surrounding the Pere Marquette River Lodge where the conference was held had tent caterpillars by the thousands crawling everywhere. Some in their webs, others munching on leaves just yards from the cabin. It was impossible to walk more than a few yards from the lodge to the dining area without seeing any. I brushed some off my shoulders and head after bushwacking through brush to catch sunset down by the river. I even found a few on my bunk that apparently came in with me for the night.

Some of the webs were almost the size of football and drew my attention quickly. The webs provide warmth during cold spring days by blocking wind and in some ways act as tiny greenhouses trapping solar heat. I believe the larger nests have a higher survival rate if a sudden cold snap hits. When rain approaches the caterpillars retreat to their tent-like webs which also provide protection from would-be avian predators with eastern bluebirds, chickadees and warblers being just three of the most common 50 or 60 species of birds that readily feast on these tiny meaty morsels.

Tent caterpillars overwintered in the egg stage. Egg masses were attached to small twigs and appear as shiny, dark gray foam wrapped around twigs, easy to photograph but often overlooked. These masses are about one inch long and contain 150 to 350 eggs. I was pleased to capture photos of some of the egg masses which blend with the twigs and can be easily overlooked.

The eggs hatched just about when the leaf buds begin to show green. The caterpillars sun themselves on the egg mass but soon move to nearby forks in the branches. It is there they begin to spin silk and form their highly visible "tents" that draw human attention. The larvae migrate to newly emerged leaves to feed, usually in the morning or early afternoon.; another aspect of their short life cycle I was excited to witness.

A technical literature search revealed these interesting facts. "These insects are social; caterpillars from one egg mass stay together and spin a silken tent in a crotch of a tree. Caterpillars from two or more egg masses may unite to form one large colony. During the heat of the day or rainy weather, the caterpillars remain within the tent. They emerge to feed on leaves in the early morning, evening, or at night when it is not too cold."

After munching on leaves for about five weeks and growing in their highly visible silken webs, the caterpillars leave their tents for the last time and spin cocoons. They then spend about two weeks within the cocoons where they pupate (a life cycle stage where a growing larva transforms into an adult) before they emerge as rather furry looking moths that are a brownish color; something I have never seen but hope to witness. After turning into moths, they live about a week or so as adults. As adults they do not feed or harm vegetation in any way. The short-lived moth's mate, deposit egg masses on young tree branches that hatch out next spring and the cycle repeats; for that is nature's way

There is no reason to panic or hire a company to spray for them even if you see some munching on leaves or they make you feel uncomfortable. Just look at them as native wildlife of the crawling kind. They will be gone in a short time and the nibbled-on vegetation will survive.

By mid-July, the likely appearance and defoliation work of our industrious tent caterpillars will be just a distant memory.

Oakland County Parks staffer Jonathan Schechter is an avid "nature-embracing" hiker who follows phenology - the study of natural cycles of nature's way - to inspire his blogs.