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Region 8

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Forest Tent Caterpillar

The forest tent caterpillar, *Malacosoma disstria*, is an important defoliator of North American hardwoods including sugar maple, oak, black gum, and aspen. Despite its name, the forest tent caterpillar does not build tents but spins silken mats on tree trunks and large branches.

New caterpillars (larvae) hatch in the early spring when leaves begin to grow. The caterpillars eat foliage, and when they are numerous, tree crowns may appear thinner or in the worst situations, they may eat all the leaves on a tree.



1. Oak leaf fed on by caterpillars.

Fully grown caterpillars are about two inches long and have a row of 10-12 footprint-shaped markings down the middle of their backs. After feeding on foliage for several weeks, the caterpillar spins a cocoon on leaves or bark. Light brown moths emerge from the cocoon and mate. Females lay up to 200 eggs in "egg bands" that encircle small twigs. The insect overwinters in the egg stage.

When enormous numbers of caterpillars are present, the situation is referred to as an outbreak. These outbreaks typically occur every 6-16 years. An outbreak may last up to 6 years depending on weather

conditions, food (leaves) supply, and natural enemies such as parasites, predators, and diseases. The effect of forest tent caterpillar feeding on trees is usually some dead branches and growth loss. However, when feeding is combined with other factors like drought or disease, a tree may die.



2. *The forest tent caterpillar larvae.*

3. *Heavy defoliation by caterpillars.*

4. *Egg band on twig.*

5. *Cocoon on leaf.*

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