

AN INVASION OF FOREST TENT CATERPILLARS

EVELYN M. CASSON, Box 11, Medstead, Saskatchewan, S0M 1W0.

My farm buildings are situated in a thick growth of poplars (mostly trembling aspen), with an undergrowth of hazelnut, rose, high bush cranberry, alders, and some saskatoons, chokecherry and pin cherry. Last year I noticed that some of these trees, at some distance from the yard, had lost their leaves through the spread of the forest tent caterpillar, but the caterpillars did not come near the buildings. This spring, however, I began to notice trees closer home with their leaves stripped. Walking out from the yard one day, I came across a poplar with its trunk thick with small, black caterpillars crawling upward. I rushed home for the spray gun and sprayed the tree trunk as high as I could reach, but on looking around I saw that all the trees nearby were covered with the caterpillars. Then I realized it would be of no use to try to spray by hand.

About 12 June I began to see caterpillars coming into the yard. At first there were only a few, which I dispatched as quickly as possible, but the trees and shrubs in the yard soon began to lose their leaves, until all were quite bare. By 15 June, the woods were full of rapidly growing caterpillars, eating voraciously and crawling everywhere. I sprayed and sprayed to keep them off the flower beds and vegetable garden. They began crawling up the walls of the buildings, and would manage to creep up a foot or so on the slippery siding of the house before falling down again. Others followed and fell on top of those below, and soon there

heaps of them, some dead and others alive. On 19 June, I hauled away seven wheelbarrow loads and poured gasoline on them to burn them.

By this time, leaves and blossoms around the yard were all eaten. The crabapples, mountain ash, rose bushes, willows, Russian almonds and cherries were mere bare sticks where a week before they were beautiful in full leaf and bloom.

In the front yard were two large Manitoba maple trees. The caterpillars moved into them, but did not eat the leaves. Instead, they climbed up the trunks and branches and then began to fall to the ground where they piled up in heaps. A total of 20 wheelbarrow loads were hauled away.

On 20 June, a plane was hired to spray. The spray killed hundreds of caterpillars, but more and more came. It was horrible to walk under the trees as there were webs all around and caterpillars were dropping everywhere. As we looked westward through the denuded forest at sunset, the trees appeared to be draped in a beautiful silken veil. Their branches were black with clustered caterpillars and looked like huge black snakes writhing up into the air.

On 22 June, the plane sprayed again, and now we began to feel that the caterpillars would be going into the cocoon stage. There were still hundreds underfoot as one walked in the yard, and the wheels of cars driving in could be heard crunching over them. By the end of June, the caterpillars were going into the pupa stage



Forest Tent Caterpillars

R.E. Gehlert

and the trees and bushes across the country were loaded with their white, fuzzy cocoons.

Ten days to two weeks later the tan-coloured moths began to emerge, and early in the morning the poles of the yard lights would be covered with moths resting in the warm sunlight. This was a boon for the busy little barn swallows and sparrows with families of nestlings to feed.

Now, where the trees had stood bare and gray, a soft green tint began to show, as if spring was just beginning. Sure enough, new baby leaves were opening, and soon the forest was green again. Now on 14 September the maple leaves (which were not eaten by the caterpillars) are

turning yellow and beginning to fall, but the young poplar leaves are still green and no sign of ripening and changing colour is seen. This probably means that the leaves have not matured.

The eggs of the forest tent caterpillar are laid in bands around the branches of the trees and these should be cut open in the late fall when the leaves have fallen.

As an outbreak of these caterpillars can last from three to six years we will probably be visited by them again next year. So let us hope that we have plenty of flesh flies, the major parasite which preys on the forest tent caterpillar.