ChequamegonChirps

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The June meeting will be at Celia Starz-Mrotek's home at

7840 Mill Creek Drive Marshfield

A bird walk will start at 6:30 with a quick meeting at 7:15 with a campfire and smores to follow. Bring chairs.

Tent Caterpillar Outbreak

Sometimes the word explosion might be the more appropriate than outbreak. This might be known as the year of tent caterpillars. What happens when conditions allow any population's numbers to expand to a crazy amount? The short, unscientific answer is--good and bad stuff. Tent caterpillars can damage thousands of acres of forests ranging from not much damage at all to trees dying. The most common result of their feeding results in poorer growth of trees due to reduced leaf area and numbers. Their presence is recognized by the "tents" they build in forks of limbs. These are not tents but a silken mat where they congregate when at rest or during molting periods. While they damage trees and their growth, they are providing nutrition for untold species of birds, mammals and insects.

Newly hatched larvae are less than an eighth of an inch long and have bristles. They will molt five times in their life cycle. They travel in groups sometimes referred to as army worms as they move to find fresh leaves for feeding. Five to six weeks after hatching, the larvae spin cocoons in folded leaves, bark crevices or sheltered areas. In these cocoons, the caterpillars change to moths which emerge about ten days later and live only a few days.

The moths lay their eggs mostly on upper-crown branches in masses of 100 to 350, which encircle small twigs. Each mass is cylindrical with truncated ends. The eggs are cemented together and are coated with a frothy glue-like substance, which hardens and turns a glossy brown. Within three weeks the embryos develop into larvae that overwinter in the eggs and hatch in the spring. Numbers are greatly reduced during their life cycle by many species feeding and winter weather can have a profound effect on the following years hatch.

Even with their bristles, they are eaten by most species of birds and some that gobble them up like Halloween candy corn. They are a favorite food for yellow and black-billed cuckoos. Baltimore orioles, blue jays, and rose-breasted-grossbeaks will tear "tents" apart to feed on the caterpillars. The DNR estimates crows eat about twenty percent of the caterpillars. Many species of songbirds use them as a feed source for their hatchlings. If they are on the ground, turkeys, pheasants and robins make them a food source. Whatever stage of life they are in, they have many predators.

Joe provided material for me to put together the previous paragraphs. Here are some of his current and past experiences and why the topic came up.

"There is caterpillar poop on just about every leaf in the forest. As I sit in the UTV eating my lunch at work, it sounds as if there is a light rain but it's actually the sound of the forest tent caterpillar pooping. It's another outbreak year and there are so many of these little buggers eating leaves in the canopy that it sounds like precipitation. I'm thankful to have a roof on the UTV to block the frass from entering my sandwich and ultimately my stomach.

"We had a district workday earlier this week to focus many hands on the removal of exotic species in one of the Forest Service gravel pits near Miller Dam. I was introduced to a new invasive—Siberian pea shrub. Most of the morning was spent using loppers while my coworker followed up behind me with an herbicide stump treatment. When we broke for lunch, we gathered in the shade of some trees to eat and talk. But as we ate, a mass of these tent caterpillars on the main bole of an aspen tree caught my attention."

"I soon found a number of these caterpillar collections. What would cause them to do this? There were probably between 40-80 of the little critters all grouped up, occasionally crawling over one another or lifting their heads up into the air and convulsing back and forth. Near the bottom of the group were a number of dead, dried-up bodies. Is this some sort of fungus or bacteria that causes neurological issues and ultimately death? The twitching back and forth—I call that the microwave dance and this takes me back to my childhood."

"You see, in my childhood I would keep these little guys in small containers and feed them leaves from the apple and cherry trees we had on our property. I enjoyed letting them crawl on my arms until they reached the sleeves of my t-shirt and then I'd pick them off and send them on their journey again. I liked watching their methodical u-shaped eating pattern on the leaves and it was fun to watch them as

they got bigger as the days went on. Oddly enough, I don't remember them very often reaching the cocoon or moth stages and I think I tended to forget the containers in pursuit of other outdoor activities. I'd leave the container in a shady spot but that darn sun kept moving. What once was a shady spot got sunny and then the glass container with plastic wrap held in place via rubber band turned into a bit of a furnace."

"Or there was this one time when for some reason, I needed to dry the caterpillars out. I don't remember what led to this but I'm guessing I left the container out in a rain storm and came back to find the little guys about drowned. Fortunately, I had a brilliant idea. I could put them on a plate, stick them in the microwave, and dry them out quickly! After just 3 seconds, they started to twitch and I realized this wasn't a brilliant idea. But that's where the microwave dance came from."

"I remember doing bird identification as a contractor for the Forest Service during summers in college. One of the areas I was working in Price County was in aspen blowdown following some severe storms that occurred around 2000. While crawling around, through and occasionally over jack-strawed aspen trees—sometimes laid on top of each other 10 feet in the air—I would grab onto limbs to support myself. I believe this was the summer of 2001 and there was a tent caterpillar outbreak that year as well. All too often, as I grabbed a support branch, my hands would sink into a mass of these caterpillars and I'd have to find something else less greasy to hold on to."

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Figure 3.—Third-instar larvae moving in a column up the stem of a quaking aspen tree.

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Figure 6.—Red maples leaves, fastened together with silk, shelter new cocoons of the forest tent caterpillar.

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Club contacts

Website: Chequamegonbirdclub.org

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June and July events

Full Moons—June 29 (strawberry)

July 29 –(Buck)

June 21—Summer Solstice:

First day of summer

July 4 250th Independence Day

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Figure 4.—Fifth-instar larvae at rest on an aspen trunk.