

Spring Defoliator Caterpillars

Comparisons, Differences, Controls

FOREST HEALTH FACT SHEET

Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources, Division of Forestry, Forest Health Program, July 2023

Three caterpillars commonly found on defoliating trees in the spring can sometimes be mistaken for one another. Knowing which caterpillar is present can help determine the best options for control, if needed. Two of these caterpillars are native to Wisconsin; the third is not native but has become established throughout most of the state.

Eastern Tent Caterpillar



Malacosoma americanum

Origin: Native.

Description: Dark head, cream or yellow stripe down the back; small blue spots on sides.

Population cycle: One generation per year. Caterpillars hatch in spring and feed voraciously before spinning silky cocoons in late spring. Adults fly in May and June. Egg masses overwinter. Localized outbreaks happen every few years; widespread outbreaks occur on roughly 10-year intervals.

Can be found: Feeding on fruit tree leaves; building silk nests in branch forks (see photo on page 2).

Photo Credit: Wisconsin DNR

Forest Tent Caterpillar



Malacosoma disstria

Origin: Native.

Description: Blue head; cream or yellow-colored spots in the shape of footprints down the back; blue stripes on the sides.

Population cycle: One generation per year. Caterpillars hatch and feed in early spring and spin cocoons two months later. Moths appear in three weeks and lay eggs shortly afterward. Egg masses overwinter. Outbreaks usually occur every 10-16 years and last 2-4 years.

Can be found: Feeding on tree leaves; no silk nests, but silk may be found on bark or along twigs.

Photo Credit: Wisconsin DNR

Spongy Moth Caterpillar



Lymantria dispar

Origin: Not native; established in Wisconsin.

Description: Yellow and black markings on head; pairs of blue dots near the head; pairs of red dots on the rest of the caterpillar. Younger caterpillars are dark, with orange dots along the back.

Population cycle: One generation per year. Caterpillars start hatching in mid-May, pupate in late June or July and emerge as adults from July to August. Egg masses overwinter. Outbreaks occur periodically when favorable weather conditions occur, typically every 8-12 years, and last 1-3 years. Outbreaks usually occur every 10-16 years and last 2-4 years.

Can be found: Feeding on leaves or hiding on tree bark during the day.

Photo Credit: Wisconsin DNR

For more information, visit <http://dnr.wisconsin.gov>

Eastern Tent Caterpillar



Egg mass: Brown egg mass deposited around stout twigs, hardened, similar to Styrofoam. Often does not fully encircle branch. Usually located near the silk nests.

Preferred host plants: Black cherry is preferred in Wisconsin, but caterpillars also may feed on apple, crabapple, maple, box elder, hawthorn and birch among others.

Photo Credit: Wisconsin DNR

Forest Tent Caterpillar



Egg mass: Brown egg mass deposited around branches, hardened, similar to Styrofoam. Fully encircles branch.

Preferred host plants: Aspen and oak, although in parts of the Midwest they prefer sugar maple.

Photo Credit: Wisconsin DNR

Spongy Moth



Egg mass: Tan, fuzzy lumps deposited on any accessible surface. Older egg masses are faded and tattered with small holes. Average size is dime-sized to quarter-sized.

Preferred host plants: Oak and aspen, as well as apple, crabapple, birch, willow and many other species.

Photo Credit: Wisconsin DNR

Control Methods

Control for all these spring defoliators can be accomplished in several ways. Note that management of tent caterpillars may be desirable in high-value yard or orchard trees but is rarely needed or economically viable in forests.

- **Pesticides:** Using pesticide sprays, including the biological insecticide *Bacillus thuringiensis* var. *kurstaki* (Btk), is most effective if applied while caterpillars are small.
- **Manual control:** Scraping caterpillars into a can of soapy water is effective. Removing the entire silken nest of eastern tent caterpillar will include the caterpillars; dropping it into a bucket of soapy water will drown the caterpillars. Crush the web nests of the eastern tent caterpillar. Crush groups of forest tent caterpillars when they congregate on the bark of trees in late afternoon. [Place a burlap skirt](#) around oaks to encourage spongy moth caterpillars to congregate in the afternoon where they can easily be crushed with a stick or drowned in soapy water.
- **Do not burn or prune:** Do not burn eastern tent caterpillar nests or prune the branches that hold them. These actions damage the tree more than caterpillar feeding.
- **Caution:** Avoid touching the caterpillars. The hairs can be irritating to skin and may cause a rash.
- **On the web:** For more information, visit the Wisconsin spongy moth portal at spongymoth.wi.gov.



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