

Caterpillar abundance in the South-Eastern forests of Gatineau Park

- A natural event -

When visiting the South-Eastern part of the Park, you may have seen shredded leaves lying on the trails, or heard what sounds like a gentle rain in the trees, in spite of the bright sunshine. These are familiar signs of the abundant presence of the Forest Tent Caterpillar (*Malacosoma disstria*), an indigenous caterpillar of North America, which feeds exclusively on the leaves of trees. 2010 is the second consecutive year with a significant infestation in the Park. This cyclical phenomenon is natural and arises approximately every ten years. It can last up to three years, or rarely even longer.

Description of the Forest Tent Caterpillar

The caterpillar is about five centimeters in length and can be identified by various traits:

- two large blue bands stretching the length of its body;
- white key-hole shaped spots covering its back;
- orange stripes inlaid along its back.

The butterfly is brown.



Life cycle

The life cycle of the Forest Tent Caterpillar begins when the female butterfly lays, over the course of the summer, between 100 and 400 eggs which she delicately deposits upon tree branches. After a slow period of development, hundreds of small caterpillars will come out in the following spring. It is these caterpillars that feed on the leaves of the trees. Each caterpillar will live from four to six weeks. After this period, it will weave itself a cocoon from which a brown butterfly will emerge two weeks later. This butterfly does not harm the trees.

Affected tree species and impacts

The appetite of the Forest Tent Caterpillar is bordering on that of a glutton! It feeds upon numerous species of trees, but it prefers Trembling Aspen, Paper Birch, Sugar Maple, Red Oak and some willows.

It is hard to believe, but the defoliation of the trees (loss of leaves) caused by the Forest Tent Caterpillar generally does not put the life of the trees in jeopardy. Although the survival of the trees is not in question, the presence of the Forest Tent Caterpillar can nonetheless slow the trees' growth during the infestation. If the trees are subjected to several continuous years of infestations, the trees' immune systems can be weakened and are as such more likely to become infected with parasites or diseases.

Natural repression

In Gatineau Park, we do not intervene when infestations of the Forest Tent Caterpillar occur. They are part of the natural cycle of the forest and they usually only happen once every ten years. The infrequency of the infestations is impacted by environmental factors, particularly parasites, diseases, and predation (birds, bees, spiders, etc.), limiting the expansion of the population of caterpillars. For example, during major Forest Tent Caterpillar infestations, the Friendly Fly (*Sarcophaga aldrichi*) multiplies more abundantly and strikes the Forest Tent Caterpillar's cocoons, thus reducing the scope of the infestation.

For further information on the Forest Tent Caterpillar

Please visit Natural Resources Canada website at:

<http://imfc.cfl.scf.rncan.gc.ca/insecte-insect-eng.asp?geID=9374>

Other particular facts

The cold temperatures observed in early May of 2010 (spring frost) have also had a negative effect on some trees of the Park. The leaves of these trees are faded or dry, but this event should not result in the death of any of the affected specimens.