Tent Caterpillars
May, 2009

Those white webs you see every year at this time in some of the crooks and branches of our forest trees are made by tent caterpillars, very indigenous to this region. Mostly known for leaf damage to young and emerging trees, especially the fruit varieties, they typically leave their nests, get their fill of the leaves around them, then migrate back to the protected webs digest in the sun warmed abodes, and they repeat this cycle for a few weeks. They do not like cold weather, which is why we have not seen them until recently. Once full grown, they leave the trees and seek out sheltered eaves or grasses to weave a cocoon and morph into moths late spring and summer. The purpose of the moth is to mate and lay eggs in the months of July and August for the next spring's offspring. Many of the moths you see flying around the street lamps and flood lights at sporting events probably started life as a tent caterpillar. Natural predators are birds, wasps, bugs, and beetles. If allowed to matriculate unopposed, some species can cause large amounts of defoliation, which in normal conditions will re-foliate over the next growing season. Nonetheless, it's a good idea to get rid or them. More information can be found on the web at sites like Wikipedia and the Arbor Day and Audubon Club.

I have asked our landscape contractor and tree service arborist the best ways to get rid of the "tents" we can reach, and the best time to do that. Treatments are spraying with a product called Sevin, burning out with a torch (not recommended in the woods), or breaking apart the "tents" and allowing natural predators to "control" the population. Even placing a bucket of water at the base of a host tree has shown to be somewhat effective, as the caterpillars are drawn to the water and easily drown. I did break open a couple of "tents" a week or so ago and found most were already empty of the full grown caterpillars. I have asked the Board to consider paying for a spraying this year, and will add a spray tasking to our landscaping contract for next year. If you are concerned about trees on your own property, the product Sevin is available at any home and garden store, please follow directions for use.

Update:

After discussing the situation with the arborist, and with Joe Kolb's concurrence, I authorized Bartlett Tree Service to spray our wooded areas first thing Monday morning, 5/11/2009, to fight off the remainder of the tent caterpillars. The plan is to start with the 3 areas highlighted by resident alerts and branch out from there. It will not be a complete 100% spray effort if there is no sign of the pests in a certain area. Bartlett will make that decision and I trust their judgment. Only GCE will be sprayed, not inside any property lines. The decision to spray was made based on 4 factors: (1) the weather has been cold and wet, not conducive to lively movements, but now the pests are starting to migrate out of the nests, some to return to continue growing, others to find places to become moths and continue their life cycle. So, some can be eliminated with the spraying; (2) taking action now, however late to the season, can still somewhat reduce the population of next year's caterpillars, (3) to help bring some solace to the concerns of the residents who are bothered now, and others who may become concerned later, and (4) if there are some young trees that are most susceptible to be attacked, maybe we can keep a few from suffering much damage that otherwise might not be so lucky. It is true, we do not, in the analysis of the arborist, have a large problem, but we are proceeding with the action nonetheless at their recommendation and my request. The process to be used is safe for the residents, but you should be aware that the wooded areas will have been treated by the end of the day.

Residents: If you have these pests are on your property and want to take action if you have the means, you should be able to purchase the same product the professionals will be using, called Sevin, in a spray bottle at your local home improvement store and apply as directed on the package.