



Vermont Forest Health

The Friendly Fly: Forest Tent Caterpillar Parasitoid

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Parasitoid of the Forest Tent Caterpillar is *Very* Friendly

Friendly Flies (*Sarcophaga aldrichi*) are reported to be very abundant in areas of Vermont following defoliation by the forest tent caterpillar. The flies are parasitoids, insects whose larvae live in or on other organisms, and eventually kill their hosts. Native to North America, they resemble, but are slightly larger than house flies, and become extremely abundant in the later years of a forest tent caterpillar outbreak. They received their name because they like to land on people, animals, food, laundry, and other items. They really know how to ruin a picnic but are a very important natural enemy of the forest tent caterpillar.

Friendly fly adults are gray in color, with reddish eyes. The sides of their heads are hairy, they have 3 black stripes on their back and checkered abdomens. They are slower than house flies and are usually active in June and July. They do not bite or transmit human diseases but may regurgitate where they land. They are the most important parasitoid of the forest tent caterpillar. They deposit live maggots on the cocoons and these bore into and kill the developing forest tent caterpillars. After completing their feeding, the maggots drop to the ground to overwinter. Friendly flies that you see now will affect the caterpillar populations for next year.

Friendly flies are sometimes called government flies because some people falsely believe the government released them to control the forest tent caterpillar. Instead, the friendly fly naturally increases as the number of forest tent caterpillars increase. Once the caterpillar outbreak ends, the friendly fly populations also collapse. In the meantime, they can be quite annoying. In an attempt to estimate the density of friendly flies during a tent caterpillar outbreak in Minnesota in 1938, a trap designed to attract these flies caught over 2000 of them in 2 hours!



In mid- to late-June, adult friendly flies deposit live maggots on FTC cocoons, then die. The maggots move into the cocoons, bore into the pupae and feed on them, killing the developing moth. Photo: R. Kelley