



nature
Timothy Nowicki

Caterpillar pest food for cuckoo

ALL living things overproduce because only a small fraction of young will ever reach adulthood.

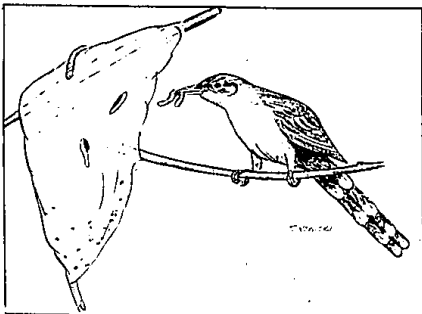
Checks and balances have been incorporated into man's world, but not nearly to the extent that they are found in nature. Remember, most organisms serve as food for other things at various stages in their life. Many people have commented to me that there seems to be an unusually large number of tent caterpillars in our area this year. These are the caterpillars that build a white, spider-web looking tent in the crotch of a black cherry tree.

Young caterpillars foray out along the branches to eat leaves. As they grow, they shed their skins, which appear as black dots inside the tent. Once a caterpillar matures, it forms a cocoon and will develop into a moth.

IN LARGE numbers on a small tree, they can defoliate it, prohibiting the tree from growing that season.

But as their numbers increase in an area, they also attract a bird that feeds on them. Yellow-billed and black-billed cuckoos tend to appear where there are outbreaks of tent caterpillars.

There are always some cuckoos around, but there seem to be more this year. Many tents around have large holes in them from the probing bill of the cuckoo. Some tents have been totally eradicated by foraging cuckoos.



Cuckoos thrive when tent caterpillars become abundant. Note holes it has picked in the "tent."

Unlike their European relative for which cuckoo clocks were named, our cuckoos are not parasitic — they do not lay their eggs in the nests of other birds.

They are long and slender with either a black or a yellow bill. Their upper parts are a medium gray-brown, color extending into long tails. Underneath, they are white from chin to belly, but their tails are only spotted with white.

ONE DOES NOT often see them fly because of their secretive nature.

If you do get a look at one, notice the senna color in their open wings. I found one dead on the road and had an opportunity to examine their unusual feet.

Unlike most of our perching birds that have three toes forward and one backward, cuckoos have two toes forward and two toes backward — similar to a woodpecker.

Populations of most organisms fluctuate within limits because of the checks and balances that nature has built in.

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