

Tent caterpillars will soon be munching

WASHINGTON, D.C. — It happens every spring. Some trees that have just sprouted new leaves lose them all to

hordes of hungry tent caterpillars. A single web of tent caterpillars, containing

more than 150 insects, can strip a healthy but unlucky tree, according to the National Wildlife

Federation. "Tent caterpillars are the larvae of a fuzzy, reddish-brown moth," explains the

National Wildlife Federation. "The moths never eat, living only a few weeks—just long enough to mate and lay eggs—but their offspring are devastating."

shades them from the bright rays of the sun." As the caterpillars grow, they add onto their tent, so it, too, gets bigger.

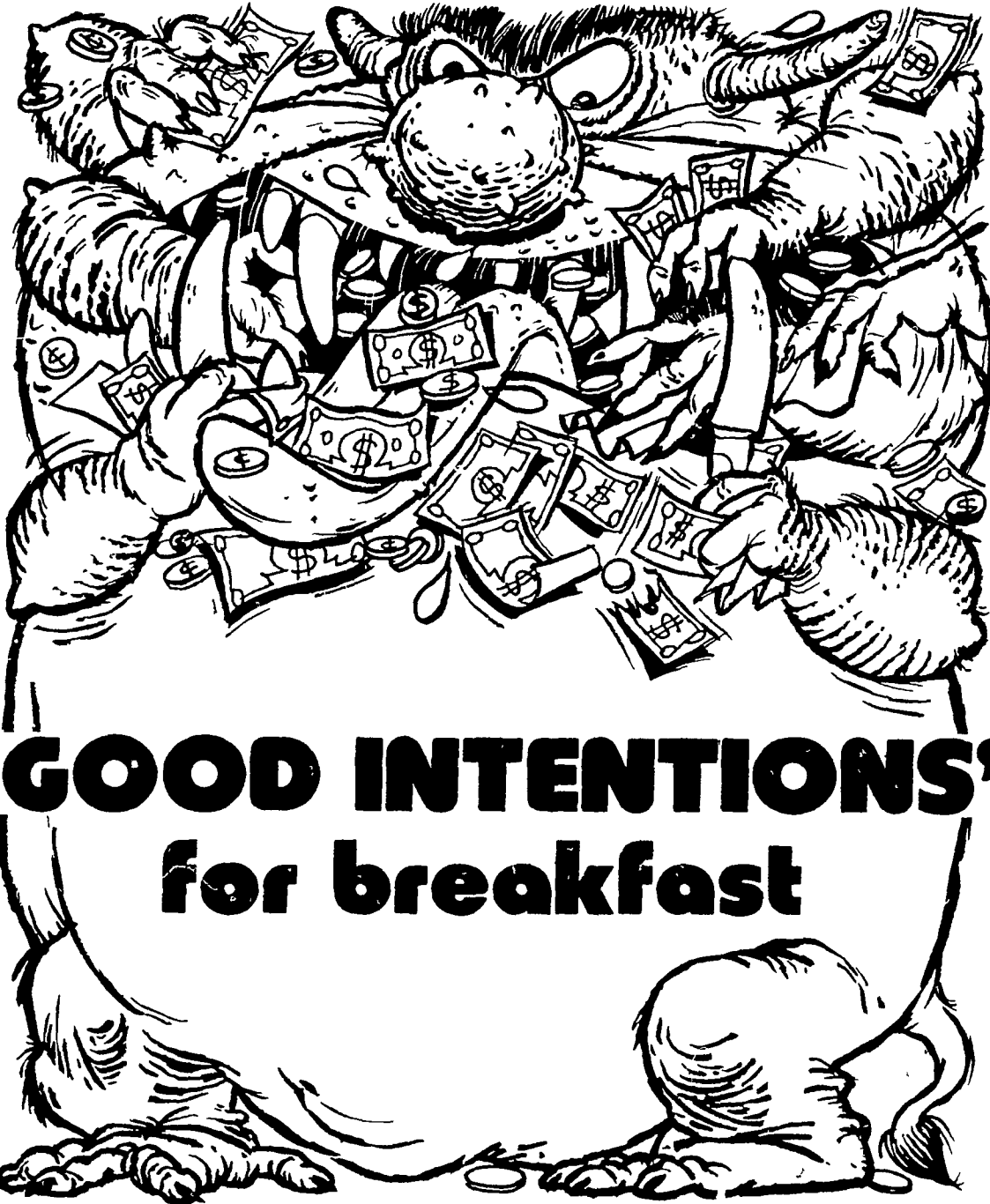
The female moth lays her eggs in a ring around a tree twig—often a wild cherry or apple tree. Then she covers the eggs with a bubbly liquid which soon hardens into a shiny, weatherproof covering that protects the eggs all winter.

Tent caterpillars stuff themselves on leaves for almost six weeks. Then they crawl away from their food tree and find a protected place to spin their powdery cocoons. In two or three weeks they change into the moths often seen fluttering around street and porch lights in midsummer.

When tent caterpillars hatch in the spring, they gather at a forked branch of the tree and begin to form their tent-like web with silk from glands in their mouths. "The web acts like a tiny greenhouse," says NWF, "storing heat and keeping the insects warm in chilly weather. It also keeps them dry during rainstorms and

It's an unfortunate cycle for many trees, but a vital one for the birds and parasitic wasps that feed on tent caterpillars. So while control of the caterpillars is sometimes necessary, naturalists oppose wiping them out completely, says NWF.

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