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It's A Bug's Life

by
Tom Holbrook

Well, we've just made it through another period of that dreaded bi-annual flying plague known as "The Love Bug," and I'm not talking about Herbie. A friend and reader of this column asked if I could provide information concerning this pesky, sexually voracious little critter that comes around twice a year making our lives semi-miserable for a few weeks and then disappears again. Specifically she wanted to know where they go when they leave... but she was too lazy to look it up. (Her words not mine.) I promptly advised that is why I'm here and proceeded to diligently seek all the information I could about our little friend that, at first glance, appears to have two heads.

First, where did it come from... We could give you the usual verbiage that tumbles off most lips when asked about the Love Bug and that is, this bug was created by man as a genetically engineered female fly that was programmed to mate with a male mosquito. The thought was to produce a sterile offspring that would love itself into extinction. The story says these befuddled scientists somehow slipped up and accidentally created a male Love Bug as well, and a pair of these elusive phenoms escaped into the wild. Naturally, since this created species had no known predators and great procreation skills, their numbers quickly exploded into the millions.

All of the above, plus any additional variants are all Urban Legends and nowhere near the truth.

Plecia nearctica Hardy, is their scientific name... named after the gentleman from Texas, D.E. Hardy who discovered them in 1940. They are also known as the honeymoon fly, telephone bug, double-headed bug, united bug, and March fly. These amorous pests originally called Central America, i.e., Costa Rica, Guatemala, and Honduras home but probably entered the United States as stowaways aboard a ship in Galveston or New Orleans in the 1920s. They found their way to Florida from Louisiana in 1947 and when they saw all the nice wetlands and decaying vegetation, which is where they lie dormant months at a time, they decided to stay and raise an even larger family.

Since this next passage deals with questionable material I would ask that you send anyone under the age of 20 out of the room before you read it. Okay... Here we go, and keep in mind I'm presenting this info in layman's terms. When temperatures rise to a certain level our little friends rise from the holes, dead leaves and moss and other decaying vegetation in which they've been growing and the males begin to swarm. It's only during certain hours of the day... usually between 8 and 10 am then again around 4 or 5 pm lasting until 8 pm.

While the males are swarming the females crawl onto vegetation and wait until the swarm comes their way, then they take flight into the swarm. Apparently the little hussies are throwing themselves at the guys. Copulatory, (nice word), behavior begins with the male darting and grasping a female that is flying through the swarm. The pair falls to the ground where they couple. Initially the male is positioned on the back of the female and both sexes face the same direction. After coupling, the male turns 180° and faces the opposite direction, hence the appearance of two heads. Successful engagement takes from 1 ½ to 10 minutes. In some formal lab experiments females that mate once usually lay their eggs and die after an average of 68 hours. Females that mated twice before laying eggs lived for a mean of 86 hours.

P. nearctica is beneficial in the larval stages to help recycle organic matter, which is a good thing for our economy say those who study these things. However, it's very difficult for most of us to appreciate that "good" contribution as we are trying clean these buggers off our automobile hoods and windshields. One reason we find so many on our cars is they are attracted to highways by irradiated auto exhaust fumes (diesel and gasoline) usually between 10 am and 4 pm with a temperature above 28 degrees centigrade (approx. 85 degrees Fahrenheit.) Hot engines and automobile vibrations also attract the bugs in large numbers.

The body fluids of a Love Bug are acidic and if allowed to remain on your car's paint for several days it can destroy the car's paint, and because of their huge swarms they have overheated water-cooled engines. For your information... I discovered that the State Highway service areas offer a free and automatic, drive-through windshield/hood washing area to help remove newly splattered bugs from your vehicle. Take advantage of it.

When their tour of duty is over our tiny, love starved visitors die a happy death after planting their eggs in the soil, knowing they will have added to our consternation and frustration when their kids make their appearance a few months later, either in May or September.

Before I close, allow me to plant a bug in your ear (another slick segue). Tomorrow night at the Church on the Square we, of the Village Voices, are having our fall concert. Great music and 140 great voices make a great evening which begins at 6 pm. The concert is free but if you want to get in you had better get there at least an hour early... and then it's not guaranteed. The church seats 770 people but it fills up quickly. Be there, you won't regret it.

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