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Natural History Notes



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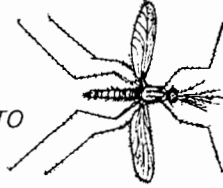
THE SCOURGE OF THE VACATIONER

We all assume that every plant and animal that exists has a purpose or performs some essential task that benefits life in one aspect or another. When the air is whining with clouds of pesty mosquitoes and people ask you, "What good are they?" you've got a tough question on your hands. The mosquito has been labeled as an animal nobody loves. They have driven people home from vacations, picnics and fishing trips. They move people from outdoors to indoors. Their annoying buzzing has led to many sleepless nights and much unsuccessful slapping. Many times I have thought how utterly ridiculous it is when an almost weightless creature can annoy a 200-pound person to the point of sleeplessness and frustration.

The mosquito belongs to a family of insects with many different species. The word mosquito means "Small fly" in Spanish. These small insects have altered the course of history many times; they almost prevented the digging of the Panama Canal. They have caused countless deaths by transmitting such diseases as malaria, yellow fever and encephalitis, only to mention a few. They are responsible for a multi-million dollar pesticide industry. Few of us dare wander into the woods in spring or summer unless armed with a can, bottle or tube of never-fail mosquito repellent.

Only the female mosquito bites other animals for a meal of blood. In fact, the male is unable to pierce the skin of any animal. He feeds on plant juices and nectar from flowers. The female is equipped with six hidden tools she uses in her quarry for a meal. The beak we see on the female mosquito is not what she uses to bite us, it is simply a protective sheath covering the biting parts — six tiny lancets. These lancets which are used in the biting process are finer than hair and sharper than razors. They pierce our skin in a painless and bloodless manner searching for a tiny blood vessel. When the target is reached an anti-clotting saliva is pumped into the vessel. This enables the female mosquito to suck out blood and also causes the itching. After this meal the female can go about her next task, reproduction. Mosquitoes not only bite warm-blooded animals, they bite

MOSQUITO



snakes, turtles, frogs, and have even been observed biting a fish whose back is exposed to the air while lying in shallow water.

Water is an essential in the development of this insect. The water doesn't have to be a swamp or stagnant pond. It can be a bird bath, a rusty tin can full of water, a puddle on a rock, or a holy water font. When the eggs are wet they quickly develop into larva called wigglers. At this stage they lie just below the surface of the water with their air tube just breaking the surface so breathing can take place. At this stage the insect serves an important purpose in the aquatic ecosystem. It eats twice its weight daily of bacteria, algae and tiny aquatic animals. These voracious little wigglers filter as much as a quart of water per day in their quest for food. A scientist counted over a thousand wigglers in a pint of water. The wiggler is the food base of many valuable aquatic insects, fish and other animals. Even ducks and geese eat wigglers by the thousands. When the wigglers develop into the adults that pester us, these little flying monsters are food for many animals including frogs, birds and bats. There is even a species of fish, called the mosquito fish, that specializes in catching mosquitoes.

The story of the mosquito could go into volumes of books, and indeed there are many fascinating tales yet untold. However, two things are certain. This insect is an essential link in the web of life; it has a purpose. Secondly, the mosquito was here before man and with all of his efforts to eradicate this insect, its numbers go almost untouched. This pest is likely to be around long after man's demise.



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