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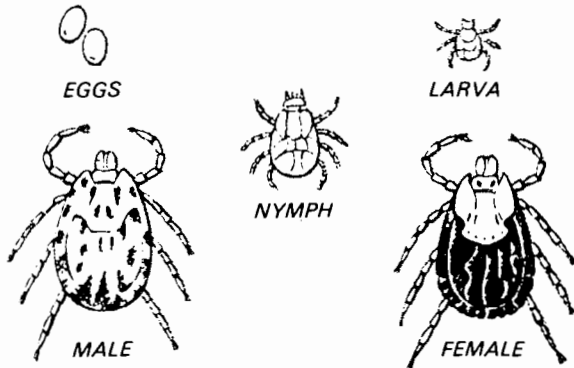


Natural History Notes



MIKE DOMBECK grew up in the Moose Lake area and graduated from Hayward High School and the University of Wisconsin-Stevens Point. He has a B.S. degree in Biology and an M.S. degree in Aquatic Biology. He has taught Zoology at the University of Wisconsin-Stevens Point and is now a fisheries biologist with the U.S. Forest Service, living in Munising, Michigan.

THE WOOD TICK



The wood tick is a common pest of man and other terrestrial animals of all sizes. Most of us who venture out into the forests, fields and marshes in spring or early summer have encountered this small animal. There are many misconceptions concerning the wood tick and some of its relatives.

This small brown creature is not an insect but is more closely related to mites and spiders. Insects have three pairs of legs, while ticks, mites and spiders have four. Wood ticks are generally 1/8 to 1/2-inch in size. Their small, flat, round-oval bodies are most often brownish (sometimes with small whitish spots) with an enamel-like shine. They resemble little brown leathery disks with eight legs and a very small head. Upon close examination you will notice that some ticks have a shield-like patch covering part of the body behind the head. These are the males. The females have a uniform leathery appearance with no shield present. The absence of this shield, along with folds of the skin in the abdomen, allows the female to expand to many times her original size as she takes a blood meal.

There are many species of ticks and all are parasitic. Some species will feed on the blood of one specific host species while others will feed on many different hosts. Man is not the usual host for the wood tick, which is more commonly found on dogs, raccoons, deer, bear and other mammals. Loss of blood is usually not significant unless a host is plagued with a large number of ticks. The more serious consequence of a tick bite is the possibility of contracting diseases they may transmit. About 600 cases of Rocky Mountain Spotted Fever occur

each year throughout the country. Ticks can also transmit tularaemia to humans from rabbits and other rodents.

Wook ticks do not burrow under the skin but, rather, work their head through the skin of a host and are held there by their strong teeth which are bent backwards. If a fastened tick is pulled off, the teeth and mouth parts may break off and remain embedded under the skin. Irritation or infection may result. It is better to cause the tick to drop off on its own. There is no one hundred percent successful way of removing a tick with all its mouth parts. Some persons bring a hot object near them to make the tick uncomfortable and claim it will back out. Others use alcohol, kerosene, cooking oil, flop the pest back and forth, etc. Whatever method you use, be cautious, observe the bite and call a doctor if an infection results.

Like most parasites, ticks are normally not harmful. If a parasite harms its host it also is affected, but if it can feed harmlessly it has a "free ride" through life. If the host dies, so may the parasite.

In many ways wood ticks are natural wonders. They have no sense of taste or sight. Smell organs, called Haller's organs, are located on the first pair of legs. They are extremely sensitive to heat and can sense less than one-tenth of a degree change in temperature. Thus they can sense when a warm animal (host) is near and then become very active. If you see a tick on a blade of grass, place your hand near it and watch it react.

Wood ticks mate while attached to a host. When the female is engorged with blood she drops off. If she falls into a suitable environment she can lay up to 3000 eggs before she dies. The young hatch and may attach to snakes, frogs, etc. They feed, drop off, molt and then find another host. Wood ticks molt three times before they mature. They live up to four years and can live up to one year without eating.

They are most common in marshes and grassy areas in spring and early summer. Don't be afraid of wood ticks, but be alert and remove them before they dig in for a meal. I recall a trout-fishing expedition; along with a stringer of fish, 141 wood ticks were brought home — and not one had dug in!