

OF STINGS AND BITES AND THINGS THAT GO BUMP IN THE NIGHT

In spite of being at the top of the food chain, there are things out there that want to eat us, even if it's only a little at a time. Most of us will never experience the life or death struggle with a large predator such as a great cat or grizzly bear, but we will all encounter during our lifetimes a vast array of smaller beasties whose soul purpose is to deprive us of a portion of our precious bodily fluids or our peace of mind.

Each area of the country is endowed with its own collection of flora and fauna with whom humans are forced to develop a cautious relationship in order to be able to enjoy the outdoors without pain and suffering. In the Northwest most of these are seasonal, but unfortunately, they all seem to coincide with the best boating weather.

The warm, damp climate of spring brings out two of man's favorite critters, mosquitos and ticks. As a logical, scientific person of learning, I have never been able to figure out the meaning of the existence of mosquitos, except as some sort of cosmic punishment for the misdeeds of my ancestors.

There are plenty of other bugs for the fish and birds to eat, so why are we plagued with these whiny, obnoxious pests who are bent on turning a nice afternoon in the woods into a non-stop dance of slapping, scratching and cursing.

Fortunately, the northern variety don't carry truly life threatening maladies such as Yellow Fever or Malaria. Instead they just make you miserable enough to want to die. Generous applications of toxic chemicals such as "DEET" (N, N-diethyl-meta-toluamide) or Avon's "Skin-So-Soft" are supposed to confuse the insect's navigation system, but in my case it sends out the message, "Big supply of fresh blood, Right Here!" Ice packs, calamine lotion and benadryl help relieve the misery, especially if mixed with the right quantity of Alaskan Amber. (Just kidding, DON'T mix antihistamines and alcohol or your anesthesia may become permanent.)

Ticks are more insidious. These are the stealth bombers of the insect world because you don't even know you've been hit until this wiggling, blood-filled mass protrudes from your skin like a creature from "Alien". The usual

first response, especially among mothers, is to scream, followed by all sorts of creative adaptations of medieval torture techniques, such as applications of vasoline, gasoline, burning cigarettes, jack hammers, dynamite and other methods of making the tick mad enough to suck harder.

Contrary to popular belief, the tick does not bury his head but holds on with two pincers shaped like ice tongs and can be easily removed by grasping the head at the skin line with a pair of tweezers and pulling directly away from the skin. Examine the head to be sure you got the pincers, then place the tick in an envelope and mail it to AT&T as a reward for calling you every night at dinner time.

The Inland Empire is blessed with the absence of the tiny deer tick which carries Lyme Disease, so you'll have to go to California or the East Coast if you have a pressing need to develop fatigue, intermittent fevers and joint pain. However, there are occasional cases of Rocky Mountain Spotted Fever, Tick Fever and a peculiar syndrome called "Tick Paralysis" from our local variety. Any flu-like illness following a known tick bite deserves a course of antibiotics, and the "paralysis" symptoms disappear when the tick is removed.

Of course everyone knows that bee stings kill more people in this country than any other animal bite, but this isn't due to "killer" bees. Bee venom is a potent allergen and those people whose immune systems react to this chemical risk a condition known as "anaphylaxis" in which large hives develop, breathing becomes difficult, and the heart can potentially fibrillate, or stop beating. This requires a previous exposure to bee venom and develops within fifteen minutes of the succeeding sting.

Treatment involves a shot of adrenalin (epinephrine), or oral benadryl and a trip to the ER. Swelling that takes twelve to twenty four hours to develop and occurs at the site of the sting, even if it involves the whole extremity, is annoying but not life threatening and does not mean that the person is susceptible to anaphylaxis the next time.

As the hot weather progresses, deer flies and horse flies become more of a problem. Like me, every boater has had to make the decision of whether to deal with that sudden shot of fire on your leg or make the stroke that will keep you from dying in that killer hole in front of your boat. Usually these bites are just a nuisance but some of them can become infected, given that

these creatures feast on feces and dead animals. If the area swells up, becomes red, hard and tender, you need drugs, pardner.

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