

NATURE NOW

By Lydia King Prehse
Special Writer for The Birmingham Eccentric

Insects Important To Nature's Work

In all of nature's economy no group can outdo the insects both from the standpoint of their tremendous numbers and the importance of their relationship to other living things.

Summer nights and days are filled with their hum and drone. They bore into the ground, they fly through the air, they perch and feed on some plant or animal or human being. Three-quarters of a million species have already been named. Including those yet unnamed, authorities report some ten million varieties present in the world.

The fertility of insects is incredible. Scientists estimate that a single pair of plant lice if left unchecked could produce enough progeny to outweigh the human population. It is also said that in six months a pair of flies could produce six trillion offspring.

THE DESTRUCTIVE POWER of insects is everywhere apparent. All of us have seen entire woodlands stripped in a few weeks by the common tent caterpillar.

lar. Grasshoppers traveling in hordes have destroyed acres of crops in a single night. Tropical ants advance in swarms, wiping out every living thing in their pathway. Such insects as mosquitoes, ticks, lice and chiggers live upon human as well as upon animal blood, sometimes carrying deadly diseases.

However this destructive aspect is only one side of the picture which binds insects to other life forms. Human society could not exist in its present form without their service as plant pollinators. Without them we would have few vegetables and fruits.

Clover fields could not exist. An acre of red clover contains about 219,000,000 individual flowers each of which must be pollinated by a visiting bee. Since many animals eat clover, we would have less beef, mutton and wool. We would also be minus our supply of cotton, linen and silk. There would be no honey. Few flowers would lend their grace, color and beauty to our fields and gardens.

ALTHOUGH BEES are our chief insect pollinators certain butterflies, flies, moths, beetles and flies also serve in this capacity. The latter are especially attracted to plants whose blossoms emit strong odors such as carrion vine and skunk cabbage. Only the gnomish moth can fertilize the yucca of the desert; a good example of the relationship between a night-flying insect and a night-blooming flower.

In the face of the great abundance of insects how does nature keep her balance? She accomplishes this by virtue of each species succumbing to enemies which keep it in check. Since an estimated three billion breeding birds in the USA are insectivorous, this group acts as an important regulator. During the fledging period, the starling feeds insects to its young at the rate of 350 visits per day.

RECORDS SHOW that the potato beetle is attacked by some 25 species of insects. The codling moth by 36, house flies by 49, cut worms by 98 and wireworms by 108. Many animals including moles, squirrels, badgers, skunks and armadillos are also fond of insects. But it is man with his sprays and insecticides who is today's greatest enemy of insects. The battle wages between the pros and cons with authorities on both sides. So much of nature's order is involved that only time can tell what the resulting advantages and penalties will be.

Some 250 million years have elapsed since the first insects flew amidst the Carboniferous forests. The final question is: Can man in his conquest of life afford to disturb the balance which nature herself has created and so long maintained? There are those among us who believe that nature always has the last word.

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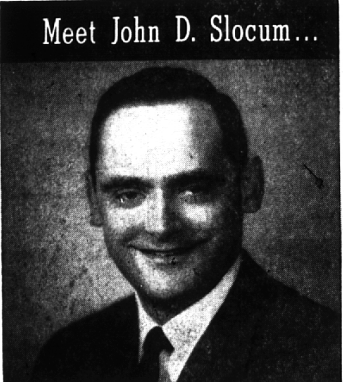
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