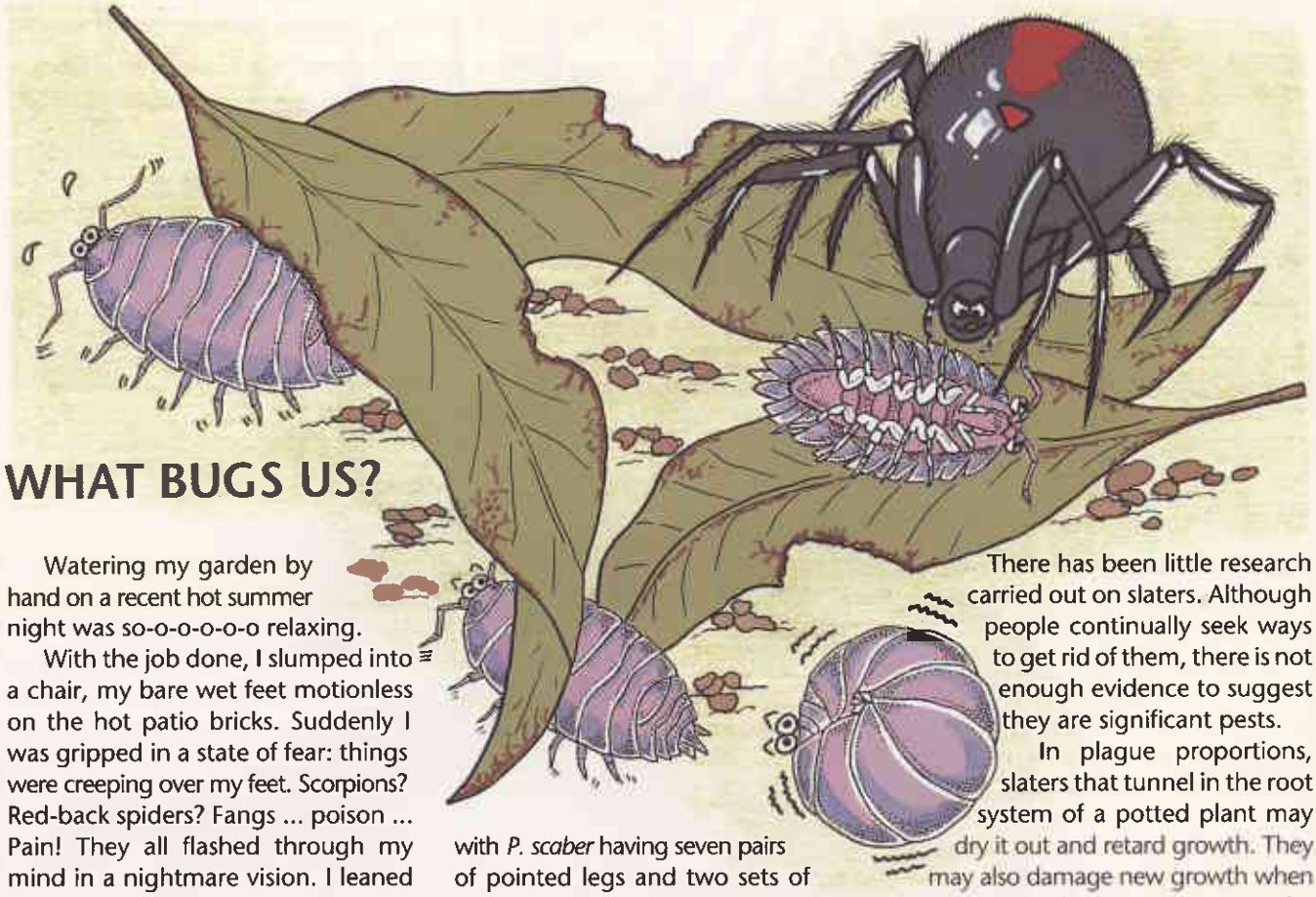
URBAN ANTICS!



WHAT BUGS US?

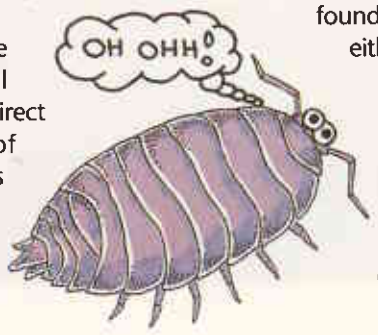
Watering my garden by hand on a recent hot summer night was so-o-o-o-o-o relaxing.

With the job done, I slumped into a chair, my bare wet feet motionless on the hot patio bricks. Suddenly I was gripped in a state of fear: things were creeping over my feet. Scorpions? Red-back spiders? Fangs ... poison ... Pain! They all flashed through my mind in a nightmare vision. I leaned forward, eyes straining in the light scattered from a nearby window.

My uninvited guests were slaters, or woodlice. My cool wet feet had attracted them to a free drink and a respite from their hot homes between and under the pavement bricks.

Slaters are a common and prolific dweller in our urban environment. They are seen regularly in gardens, backyard sheds, or any dark, moist area. It is not unusual to have them come from behind a skirting board and scamper across the lounge room carpet while the family watches TV.

Several species of slaters are found in Western Australia, but the one most likely to be seen is *Porcellio scaber*, an exotic species probably transported here in a packing case many years ago.



Slaters are terrestrial crustaceans, direct relatives of crabs, prawns and lobsters. They are invertebrates, with *P. scaber* having seven pairs of pointed legs and two sets of antennae. The animals are a dull pinkish-grey colour and are covered with a segmented armour-like cuticle which resembles the tailpiece of a rock lobster.

The local species of slater is from the most successful group of terrestrial crustaceans. Like an armadillo they can roll into a ball which protects them from predators and the loss of body moisture.

The thin shell or exoskeleton of slaters does not have the waxy component of terrestrial insects and spiders, hence their nocturnal habits and their preference for nooks and crannies where the atmosphere is humid.

Humidity and water are essential to slaters, as the seven different families found throughout the world breathe either through moisture-laden gills or a lung-like cavity. They feed on any moist decomposing organic matter, mostly decaying vegetation, and are therefore an important link between plants and larger animals in the food chain.

There has been little research carried out on slaters. Although people continually seek ways to get rid of them, there is not enough evidence to suggest they are significant pests.

In plague proportions, slaters that tunnel in the root system of a potted plant may dry it out and retard growth. They may also damage new growth when they devour decaying parts. On the whole, though, the animals are worth putting up with, as they otherwise do our gardens good.

As former denizens of the deep, slaters are secretive and special animals, worthy of tolerance and further study.

JOHN HUNTER

Did you know?

Invertebrates make up 98 per cent of the world's animals.

The class Crustacea has a sub-class called Malacostraca, the prawns, crabs, lobsters and woodlice or slaters. They total 18 000 species. Some species are 1 mm long, while the Japanese spider crab has a limb span of nearly four metres.

Most crustaceans have several larval stages before they mature. Slaters are hatched as miniature adults, with some species carrying their young on their antennae.

*Visitors from around Australia are discovering what those who live nearby already know - D'Entrecasteaux...*C'est Magnifique. *Turn to page 10.*

LANDSCOPE

VOLUME SIX NO. 3 - AUTUMN EDITION 1991

There's more to invertebrates than slugs, maggots and spiders. Turn to page 28 to find out just why invertebrates are so important.

What has happened to Fitzgerald River National Park since the 1989 wildfire? See page 34.

Seabirds nest on Pelsaert Island in the Houtman Abrolhos by the million. See page 17.

Explore the Dampier Archipelago, a group of rocky islands with a violent past and a wealth of wildlife. Turn to page 48.

FEATURES

REGULARS

COVER

Invertebrates play an important role in the ecosystem of WA's jarrah forest. Earthworms, termites and ants fragment leaf litter and mix organic matter. Some soil and litter invertebrates stimulate plant growth. Soil insects such as larval beetles feed on roots, stimulating the plants' growth rate. Our cover illustration is Philippa Nikulinsky's impression of this process at work in the jarrah forest.

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