

URBAN ANTICS!

Ant-lion



Predator ... a chilling word, most apt to describe the tiny ferocious beast that is probably lurking in your garden right now. Apart from the pyrotechnics of the alien in Schwarzenegger's movie 'Predator', the game of death ... is the same.

Ever noticed the tiny cone shaped excavations in the loose sand of sheltered places around your house? Well, under each one lies an insect larva that would seem to be more inelegant, more insensate and more infernal in its psyche as a hunter than many other of our planet's larger beasts of prey. Hence the name ant-lion.

The ant-lion is the larva of a lacewing, a graceful insect with gauzy wings and a slender abdomen that somewhat resembles a dainty damselfly. Here, the similarities between the young and the adult seem so remote, its metamorphosis is perhaps the ultimate change from ridiculous to sublime.

An ant-lion is best described as an ugly, squat creature with a fat, bristly body and a narrow head. Attached to the head is a disproportionately large pair of sword-like jaws, which the creature wields ferociously as it attacks and devours ants and other insects that stumble into its pit-trap.

Three pairs of legs are attached to the body of an ant-lion, close behind the head. This enables the beast to move more easily—it walks backwards, using its body like an inverted shovel as it manoeuvres through loose dry soil.

If you want to find out what it's

really like in the world of an ant-lion, get down on the ground, place yourself into its habitat and observe its demeanour...eyeball to eyeball.

With your nostrils only millimetres from the earth and savouring the repugnance of a squillion dust-beams, the terrain in which your chin is buried now appears as a hostile, barren dunescape of quartz, sticks, dust and craters. No place for a human being and rather dicey, especially if you're caught by visitors with your 'gob in the garden'.

If you are left alone long enough in this undignified position, you may notice something.

Almost from nowhere will come a little moving mound of granules, bobbing along in fits and starts and leaving a small depression trail behind. As it approaches your face, you begin to wonder about those huge scimitar-shaped jaws below ground.

On selecting a flat area among the existing pits, the underground ant-lion moves in ever decreasing circles, scooping sand over its body. From time to time, it flicks the soil to one side with a snapping jerk of its head, until it has reached a centre point. By then, it is at the bottom of a funnel-shaped hole where it waits patiently with its head and mouth parts protruding.

To ensure that prey falls from the rim of the pit into its outstretched mouth, the ant-lion fires a powerful salvo of sand granules the moment

the pit walls are disturbed. It rarely succeeds in claspng its victim firmly on the first try, and often must repeatedly toss its quarry against the walls of the pit, or release and recapture it with a new barrage of sand. When the jaws are in position, the ant-lion drags the body under ground and sucks it dry. Later it will unceremoniously flick the drained carcass out of the trap.

As a boy, I would often deposit a large, wounded, black meat ant on the inside of a crater rim. The game would then commence, the colosseum would erupt and the lion and the intended victim would do combat.

Sometimes, but rarely, the victim miraculously escaped ... so I let it.

BY JOHN HUNTER

DID YOU KNOW?

- *The jaws of an ant-lion are also piercing, sucking tubes. When the tips are in position, a glandular secretion passes through that paralyses and liquifies body tissues.*
- *Ant-lions belong to one of 15 families in the order Neuroptera meaning 'net or nerve wings'. There are more than 600 species of neuropterans in Australia.*
- *Adult ant-lions scatter their eggs on sand. After three to five moults, ant-lion larvae spin silken cocoons, pupate and emerge as adults.*

LANDSCOPE

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Noisy scrub-birds are rare in museum collections. This one, from a Dutch Museum, was probably collected by John Gilbert. See page 36.



Mount Bakewell looms over the old town of York, but it is more than just a prominent landmark. Find out why on page 42.



This year, The Hills Forest celebrates its fifth birthday. Find out what's been happening there in our story on page 10.



The Kimberley region of Western Australia has some weird and wonderful landforms. Read all about them on page 16.



The northern quoll is just one of WA's marsupials that have been part of a recent conservation status review. See page 22.

FEATURES

THE HILLS FOREST: THE FIRST FIVE YEARS
KATE BAXTER & STEV SLAVIN.....10

GEOLOGY AND LANDFORMS OF THE KIMBERLEY
IAN TYLER.....16

MARSUPIAL CONSERVATION
ANDREW BURBIDGE & KEITH MORRIS.....22

INSECTS IN THE GARDEN
JANET FARR.....28

JOHN GILBERT'S AUSTRALIAN COLLECTIONS
CLEMENCY FISHER.....36

SUMMIT OF THE WHEATBELT
SUSAN PATRICK.....42

EXTINCTIONS IN WESTERN AUSTRALIA
IAN ABBOTT.....49

REGULARS

BUSH TELEGRAPH.....4

ENDANGERED
CARRICK'S MINTBUSH.....48

URBAN ANTICS ANT-LION.....54


COVER

Get down on the ground, scramble through the leaf litter and compost in your garden, and discover the fascinating world of insects. 'Insects in the Garden', on page 28, shows how these seemingly insignificant creatures help keep the ecosystem running smoothly and how they are a vital part of nature's life-cycle.

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