

urban antics

by John Hunter

Well... I'll be bugged

Autumn is a time when your backyard and even your bed is probably crawling with life... who mentioned bed bugs?

Did I see you wince a little? Let me confuse you a little more.

The word bug is generally a colloquial term used by most urbanites to describe those insects and some other small crawling creatures that occasionally share the same locality and personal space as us. It is only natural, therefore, that most people think of centipedes, slugs, maggots and spiders—the classic 'creepy-crawlies'—as bugs... but they are not.

True bugs, of the group Hemiptera (meaning, half-wings) are in fact insects, but then, not all insects are bugs. The Hemiptera has members of many different forms including aphids, hoppers, scale insects, cicadas and, confusingly, the true bugs of which there are many types and species. The one thing they all have in common is their sucking beak-like mouthparts. While most use this to suck juices from plants, some are voracious predators of other animals.

The animals mentioned, and many more, are all invertebrates having no internal backbone but rather a hard outer covering or exoskeleton. Animals without backbones account for as much as 98 per cent of the Earth's animal diversity, and are of fundamental importance in almost every ecosystem on the planet.

It's enough to make you, a single human species, feel uncomfortable, more confused and totally unimportant. It's enough to bug you... oh no!

A common aquatic bug (true bug) often found in our swimming pools is the backswimmer *Anisops* sp. They are often seen swimming upside down on their



back with their legs up just below the surface. They are recognised by a repetitive jerky motion and their two large hairy back legs as they search the surface for prey. Adults are also conspicuous by the very big eyes that occupy most of their head, their curved back and a broad keel on the abdomen.

Backswimmers are found naturally in ponds, slow-flowing creeks, canals and rivers. They spend most of their time in water but fly from pond to pond should the area no longer suit them. Adults and larval animals are voracious predators and eat smaller animals such as blood worms and aquatic larvae. They attack prey as large as tadpoles and can inflict a painful bite from their proboscis needle on a human finger. When hunting, they

snatch invertebrates from the water's surface, drag them under, impale them and suck the body juices.

Adult backswimmers breathe by storing oxygen in a bubble on the body hair of their abdomen. When required, they do a quick turn at the surface to replenish the air bubble. It is this bubble reflecting from the sky that, gives backswimmers a silvery look. To find a mate, the males make sounds to attract a female and after the eggs are fertilised inside her body, she lays them in holes she drills into plant stems.

So, to feel at ease, keep your pool free of vegetation and smelling like battery acid and you'll have no little backswimmers or white pointers to worry about.

DID YOU KNOW?

- Australia has some 5650 known species of bugs from about 60,000 worldwide and more are being discovered all the time.
- Fish, turtles, waterbirds and lots of insects that live in the natural waterways eat backswimmers.
- Backswimmers have the ability to withstand extremely contaminated water.

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