

urban antics

by John Hunter

Love is all around...

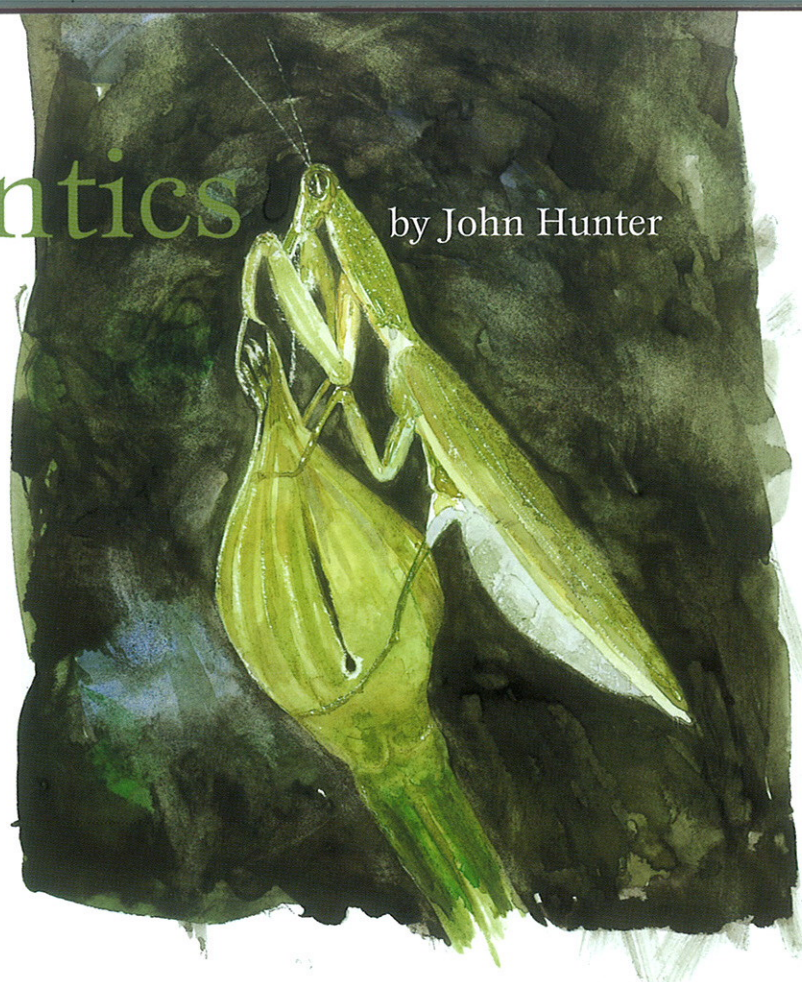
Summer and early autumn might best be described as a time when spring, for most insects, is really in the air... and on the ground and in the water and the dirt under your feet. It is that time of the year when, from evening onward, being outdoors can be murder or magic.

Around any home barbecue, the near horizontal rays of the sun shaft through the shadows of bush and buildings to expose a seething cauldron of busy bodies and you suddenly realise you are out-numbered, out-flanked and out there with perhaps millions of insects. At times they will bite you, at times they will caress your ear with a cool swish of wings and at other times they will crawl with a nice but nerve-wracking tickle over your bare feet. They are with us, they are on us and, for all we know, they are in us.

Insects are a major group of arthropods, which are those animals having a segmented exoskeleton and jointed appendages. They are the most diverse group of animals on Earth, having more than a million described species and an estimated 30 million undescribed species which altogether represent 90 per cent of the life forms on the planet.

To further excite any human, insects are not to be confused with that group of arthropods with similar appearance, those being wood lice, crabs, lobsters, sand hoppers, spiders, ticks, mites, scorpions, centipedes and millipedes, to name a few.

It might be said that insects have been so successful on the planet for some 300 million years because they possess an uncanny wisdom and do many things that humans do. They raise crops, herd insect 'cattle' that they 'milk' of a sweet liquid and some are like architects and engineers—they construct intricate living quarters with year-round weather control. There are insect carpenters, papermakers, slave raiders and undertakers. It is also well known that ants, bees, wasps and termites live in social



organisations more complex than those of human societies.

Some 50 million years before the first vertebrates, the evolution of wings by many insects gave them ascendancy over all other life forms at the time. Most insects advanced even more quickly by achieving complete metamorphosis from egg, through the specialist food gathering activity of larva (grub or caterpillar form) then pupa (dormancy) and then imago or adult form. So efficient is the food-gathering capabilities of the North American polyphemus moth (*Antheraea polyphemus*) caterpillar, it consumes an amount equal to thousands of times its birth weight in days.

In truth, many insects are considered pests by humans but

then again we know that they are gatherers of refuse and in doing so, are responsible for much of the planet's good topsoil quality. The most useful of all insects are insectivores, those that feed on other insects. Without them, potential reproduction and survival of all insect offspring could literally bury the Earth in a single season.

Insects have an enormous ability to adapt and resist, so when you next wield that aerosol insect spray, wonder what it's really doing to their genetics. One day they may all gang up on us, or to be more positive, perhaps offer to give us a... claw.

One could go on forever but the more we learn about insects the more they will probably turn out to be the real 'never ending story' of our planet. Who knows?

DID YOU KNOW?

- Caterpillars have several thousand muscles and humans only have about 500.
- Female painted apple moths (*Teia anartoides*) have no wings; their caterpillars disperse by making an open gossamer sail out of silk and sail away on the wind.
- Some wasps can count, they've never been taught, but they know that they must always leave a certain same number of prey for male young and considerably more, but always the same number, for female young to survive.

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