

Dealing with deer flies in Colorado



Tips from the Posse

By Mark Rackay

My adopted dad owned a ranch west of Laramie, Wyoming. The ranch had three streams, loaded with catchable size trout. I spent a number of summers there chasing those fish around, in between ranch chores.

Dad irrigated the fields by flooding every spring for the short growing season. Besides greening up the hayfields, the flooding brought about a fresh batch of deer flies. For those of you who have had experience with deer flies, I probably need not say anymore, but most people would prefer a hurricane.

Walking through those fields amongst the swarms of deer flies was an experience in pain and aggravation I will never forget. The fishing had to be fantastic in order to put up with those biting beasts from Hades.

There are several types of flies in Colorado that bite people. These include deer flies, black flies and biting midges. Some of these biting insects can become a serious problem, besides giving a very painful, blood drawing bite.

Deer flies look very much like the common housefly, but do not be confused. Houseflies don't bite. Deer flies, on the other hand, have a sword-like proboscis used for sucking blood.

A mature deer fly will be around one third of an inch long. They are a grey or light brown color with large colored eyes. The wings will usually have patterned stripe coloration on them.

Deer flies will seek out blood several times a day. Unlike the mosquito, both male and female deer flies feed on blood. The female drinks blood for the purpose of reproduction, because she needs protein to produce eggs. The male bites and drinks blood, well...because he just likes to irritate you. Together, they will swarm and bite, all the while making life just plain awful for cattle, horses, people and dogs.

Any of you who have horses know all about biting flies. Stable flies, a close relative of the deer fly, will develop in straw and old manure. Snowy winters, followed by wet springs, are perfect for the breeding grounds of these biting insects. Dry springs will cause the straw and hay fields to completely dry out, killing the larvae.

The larvae of a deer fly will develop in the mud along pond edges or



A close-up of a deer fly. These tiny little creatures can sure deliver a painful bite. (Robert Webster/Wikimedia commons)

stream banks, wetlands, and other areas that tend to stay moist year round. Some deer flies are aquatic and a few will actually develop in relatively dry soil.

Females will lay batches of eggs, sometimes up to 1,000, on vegetation that stands over water and wet sites. The larvae that hatch from those eggs will drop to the ground and feed upon the decaying organic matter in the soil or water.

The larvae stage will last from one to three years, depending on the specific species. The mature larvae will crawl to a drier area to pupate and eventually become the blood-sucking fly everyone hates. The adult fly will rest in the grass or shrubbery, waiting for their next victim to happen by. The adult stage will only last for two to three weeks.

Deer flies are active only during the day. These flies are attracted to such things as movement, shiny surfaces and carbon dioxide, like when we exhale. Once they land on you, they will use their knife-like mouth to slice open the skin and feed on the blood pool they created.

The saliva of a deer fly contains an anticoagulant to keep the bite bleeding for a while. Those who are allergic to anticoagulants can develop a reaction, including hives and difficulty breathing. For the rest of us, it is a painful bite that turns into an itching welt, usually lasting 24 to 48 hours.

Large populations of these flies can play havoc

with dairy cows, beef cattle and horses. When these animals are under attack from the hordes of these flies, they tend to bunch together for defense. Animals may even injure themselves as they run to escape these biting insects.

The blood loss to cattle can be significant. In a USDA bulletin, No. 1218, it was estimated that a fly would consume up to 1cc of blood for their meal, and that 20 to 30 flies feeding for six hours would take 20 teaspoons. This would amount to a quart of blood every 10 days.

Deer flies can be a serious problem around open water and swimming pools. The flies may be attracted to the shiny surface of the water or the movement of the swimmer. Folks with small children should stay alert when kids are swimming in areas with deer fly populations.

The deer fly is an intermittent feeder. Their painful bite elicits a response from the victim, such as a swat or running, and the fly is forced to move on to the next victim. Consequently, they may be mechanical vectors of animal and human disease.

Not only can they transmit disease, several species of parasites can also be transmitted through a bite. Some of the diseases and parasites include anthrax, tularemia, equine infectious anemia, anaplasmosis, hog cholera, filariasis, and Lyme disease. Not just a nuisance, these flies can be deadly.

There is not much you can do chemically for deer fly larvae. Removing vegetation from the edges of ponds can help. For adult flies, there are chemicals that you can spray directly on shrubbery and other resting sites.

There is a simple form of protection for people that is a sticky white patch, made by Tred-Not-R, that attaches to the back of your hat. This patch is attractive to the flies as they seek out a host and are captured on the patch. I don't like the thought of wearing a patch full of flies on my head, but if it works.

A liberal dose of insect repellent, containing Deet

(N-diethyl-meta-toluamide) can give you up to five hours of relief from their bites. Carry the bottle with you because it can come off the skin with perspiration.

Light colored clothing and a protective mesh outdoor wear can be of some value in reducing the annoyance of biting insects. Hats with a mesh veil (mosquito netting) work well for the face and neck areas.

The season for deer flies usually begins in early June and runs out by the end of July, but their presence can be felt until the snow comes. I now know that deer flies

are attracted to carbon dioxide and are only out during the day. Had I known that as a kid, I would have only fished at night and held my breath.

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