Les Harrison
Ag & Natural Resourses Agent
County Extension Director
UF/IFAS Wakulla County Extension

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Love Bugs

They have been the subject of countless irritated conversations, undeleted expletives, and even a conspiracy theory involving a maniacal university researcher's desire to unleash an insect plague on Florida's burgeoning vehicle population. The Lovebug, Plecia nearctica, is the focus of exasperation, urban legend and general misunderstanding.

In the 1970's an anonymous practical joker fabricated the myth of a University of Florida entomologist who developed a slow flying insect which would populate the roadways and cover cars with goo as a punishment for a variety of societal transgressions. Over time some of the details morphed to suit the teller's perspective.

One version of the tale had the professor's brother owning an auto-body paint shop and the bugs were part of a get-rich-quick scheme. The truth has no real intrigue, just the chronicle of a prolific insect that took advantage of environmental factors to expand its range.

Lovebugs originated in Central America, but migrated to Galveston, Texas, by 1940 where they were first reported in the United States. By 1949 they had reached Escambia County and today are found in every Florida County and all gulf coast states.

Lovebugs are most infamous for decorating automobile and trucks. They have a justifiable reputation for etching vehicle paint at the point of impact, but it is not really their fault.

While it is true their body fluids are slightly acid, the damage to the finish occurs with time. If the Lovebug's residue remains on the vehicle for several days, bacterial action increases the acidity and etches the paint.

These creatures have an unfortunate craving for diesel and gasoline exhaust fumes. Hot engines and vehicle vibrations may also contribute to their interest in highways, and the ultimate demise of some unlucky pairs.

Post-appearance chemical control of Lovebugs is pointless. Adult males live for two to three days or a bit longer and females may live for a week or a little longer. A spraying program would need to be daily to achieve any level of control.

About four weeks in April through May and August through September have the largest populations of Lovebugs. In addition to the two large emergences, this species has been collected in Florida every month of the year except November.

The females lay approximately 350 gray, irregularly-shaped eggs in or on the soil surface under partially decayed vegetable matter which is used for food and shelter. Slate-gray larvae are often found in groups where moisture under the decaying vegetation is constantly present.

One of the positive byproducts of the heavy rains and standing waters currently being experienced in Wakulla County is many of the larvae will drown. Unfortunately, standing water does encourage mosquito reproduction with all its associated problems.

The reduction of the annual forest burning cycle and development of improved pastures may have contributed to the presence of larger populations of Lovebugs by minimizing egg and larva loss. Pastures with ample livestock manure are also attractive larva incubation sites.

Biological controls may prove to be the ultimate answer to the Lovebug's excesses. There are 16 native fungi UF/IFAS Extension Entomologist have identified as potentially lethal to these pests. Research is ongoing.

To learn more about Lovebugs, contact the UF/IFAS Wakulla Extension Office at 850-926-3931 or visit http://wakulla.ifas.ufl.edu/.