

DIG THIS By Peg Tillery (for 3-31-04) "Toe Biter" , ©2005

NOTE – Small "a" on americanus

I have no explanation why this insect phenomenon is occurring, but lately we've been receiving about two "Toe Biters" a week in our Extension Office Clinic. What's a "Toe Biter?" It's a Giant Water Bug called *Lethocerus americanus*. It lives in wet and/or moist places. Many people mistake it for a giant cockroach. We see more of these insects in the summer but this year we're being asked to identify them in March.

The *Lethocerus americanus* is two inches long but when people discover it they think it's ever so much larger. In my Extension career I first heard about this interesting insect when a lady called the office saying her kids had found an insect on their deck "with malice intent in its eyes." She lived in Poulsbo so I told her to take it to the Master Gardener Clinic at Central Market and the Master Gardener on duty could keep it until I could pick it up. The lady put it in a "Gatorade" bottle and the Master Gardener had it on her floor where her dog took great sport in rolling the "Gatorade" bottle around the floor trying to get to the insect to no avail. It's a good thing the puppy did not get to the insect. *Lethocerus americanus* can bite hard and that's where the name "Toe Biter" comes in. The name came from people dangling their toes off a dock in the summer and the toe biters thought the toe looked like lunch.

These giant water bugs live in ponds and in still or slow-flowing water waiting for a fish, tadpole or insect. *Lethocerus americanus* has two bent legs in front to reach out and snag anything coming nearby. The bug snatches up its prey, inserts its sucking beak, injects digestive juices and waits for its prey to begin dissolving until it's time to slurp up the meal. While waiting the *Lethocerus americanus* uses its two sets of powerful back legs to swim away with its meal. Even though the mom described this bug's eyes as "menacing" I personally think the beady eyes are pretty cute. So far no one seems to agree with me.

This insect is purported to be the largest aquatic insect in the Pacific Northwest. You can see a photo of it in "Bugs of Washington and Oregon" by John Acorn and Ian Sheldon, Lone Pine, ISBN 1551052334 (\$11.95) found at our local libraries and bookstores. This giant water bug is found on page 124. Visit <http://www.naturenorth.com/summer/bug/wtbgF.html/> for more information about the "Toe Biter," or <http://www.insectimages.org/browse/subimages.cfm?sub=3468> with four clear photos of the insect.

The book "Bugs of Washington and Oregon" says, "With its swollen front legs, this critter looks a bit like a muscled weightlifter holding two long spikes above its head. Oddly enough, it also looks like a domino-sized piece of wet, brown cardboard. In flight, it looks a lot like a small bat, and it is often attracted to lights at night." I'd love to see one in flight (I think).

Toe biters are relatively harmless (unless you're a tadpole, fish, insect, or toe). *Lethocerus americanus* is part of the fascinating ecosystems in which we live. Some other critter probably has them for lunch or a snack too.

Don't panic about this interesting creature. Some people catch toe biters for a class project and observation, keeping them in a freshwater aquarium (with an aeration system). Articles on the subject recommend feeding the *Lethocerus americanus* tadpoles or feeder goldfish. Eeek! I'd rather not observe that part of this fascinating bug's life cycle. Luckily, though, everyone brings a live specimen into the office. After I identify it, reassure the person, I go outside and let the toe biter free in the drainage pipe near our office.

Don't forget the Master Gardener Foundation of Kitsap County's Speaker Series beginning on April 10 with Marianne Benetti at the Silverdale Red Lion from 1-3 p.m. Other speakers in this series are: Dan Hinkley, Ann Lovejoy and Mary Robson. Tickets for the series are \$35 (a bargain). Purchase tickets at Bergers Garden Center, Port Orchard Nursery, Valley Nursery and Country Gardens and Nursery. You can also call DeLona Kent at 360-871-0208. Tickets are available at the door for twelve dollars, but ease Chair Person DeLona's concerns for a great turnout and get your tickets now.

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