



Hoppin' Homopterans!

The title for this month's article may sound like an expression from a bad Batman and Robin movie, but it describes pretty well a characteristic of many of the insects belonging to the Order Homoptera. There are leafhoppers and tree hoppers, as well as some non-jumping members such as aphids, scale insects, cicadas, whiteflies and others.

The Homopterans are a very diverse group when it comes to body shape and structures, but all have the same distinguishing characteristics such as piercing, sucking mouthparts and wings that are very membranous and are held over the body in a tent shape.

Who hasn't been outside in July and August and not heard the cicadas high pitched song during the day? This was the year of the 17 year locust (really a cicada) on the east coast. The sound that the male makes can be so irritating, that one puts their hands over their ears to shut out the sound. The sound can be deafening! Actually, he is looking for a mate and is serenading for a willing female.

Some Homopterans have extremely weird shapes. There is a lanternfly (a cicada relative) in the tropics that has a head shaped like a large peanut. The markings on this "peanut head" include a false eye and teeth markings, making the insect look like a newly hatched crocodile or lizard. The rest of its coloration enhances this effect, and, if that doesn't work to scare off its enemies, as it flies away, it has two large eyespots on its hind wings to momentarily confuse the predator. Some of the tree hoppers have projections on the top of their thoraxes that are twisted into bizarre shapes. All of this is for camouflage purposes, of course.

Certain aphids and a few other genera try to make themselves distasteful by secreting a waxy substance over their bodies. Some actually have plumes of wax that form bushy "tails." One species of aphid we have here in Oregon is black in ground color, but secretes long plumeous wax filaments that are very light blue in color. As it flies, it makes a very striking and beautiful insect. Spittlebugs secrete a soapy, waxy substance that the larva can whip up into a froth in which to hide as it sucks juices out of the host plant.

The Order Homoptera has many characteristics that are very unusual for the animal kingdom. Next time you are in the MG office, check out some of the books on insects that have information about the Homopterans. You will find some amazing information.

