

Kids Do the Darndest Things!



A few years ago Bill Cosby had a TV show titled "Kids Say the Darndest Things." Reminiscing, I happened to think that some immature insects have really unique activities. So these "kids" are the subject of this month's Buggy Bits.

The larvae of lacewings are voracious feeders. In fact, they are so vicious, the female lacewing lays her eggs on the end of one-inch hair-like stalks to keep the tiny hatchlings from eating each other. The larvae are unusual in that their large curved mandibles are hollow, and when one chomps down on its prey, it simply needs to hold on tight and suck the juices right out of the insect, like you would suck a milkshake through a straw.

Doodlebugs are the immatures of ant lions. The adult ant lion looks very much like a small dragonfly, but has long antennae. The doodlebug is shaped much like a hen's egg, but about 1/4 inch long. It also has huge hollow mandibles like the lacewing larva. Doodlebugs are found in loose sand where they dig, moving backwards in ever decreasing circles, a funnel shaped pit. The larva buries itself at the very bottom of this pit with just its jaws showing. Eventually, an ant or other small insect will venture by and begin to slip into the funnel. As the ant struggles, the sand grains give way, and the ant tumbles down to the waiting jaws of the young ant lion. If it looks like the ant will escape, the ant lion larva will use its jaws to flip sand up on the funnel to create an "avalanche" of sand and force the ant down to the bottom again.

Ants in the mature stage cannot produce silk. They can, however, as larvae, spin silk to make their little cocoons in which they transform into adults. Certain ants in the tropics are very migratory. They wander from place to place looking for new food sources. Once they have found a convenient source, the entire colony sets up camp to devour the food. They enclose an area by pulling together leaves and debris and cementing it together with silk. How? The adult ants grab a larva and give it a gentle squeeze. This causes the larva to spin out silk. The adult holds the larva in its jaws and literally "sews" the leaves together by moving the larva back and forth as the silk is given out. When the larva is out of silk, the ant simply grabs another one to continue the process. With hundreds of ants doing the same thing, the temporary "tent" is completed in short order!

These are just a few examples of the wonderful, unusual lives of immature insects. There are many more fascinating stories out there to be told. Oh well, there's always next month!

