

Lousy Insects!



This is a lousy article! No, really! Its about the group of insects that make some people and whole groups of animals miserable. These are namely: the lice. I realize that this is not a pleasant subject, but the two groups of lice, the chewing type and the sucking type, have raised havoc among human and animal populations for as long as we have been in existence. They say that Napoleons army in Russia was decimated as much by louse-borne typhus as it was by hunger and exposure. The opposing Russian army also suffered from that disease carried by lice.

The chewing lice, Order Mallophaga, use animals as their host. Some are very specific as to the species that they attack. Most of these feed on feathers of birds or hair of animals. Some feed on flakes of skin and can cause an irritation that will produce itching for the animal involved. The problem with these insects is the sheer numbers that, when they find the correct host, will reproduce a thousandfold and cause a considerable loss of condition and life.

The other Order, Anoplura, are called the sucking lice. These are primarily important because they attack both animals and humans. Their mouthparts are modified into small stylets that penetrate the skin and a tubule sucks up the blood that is produced. Of course, these penetrations can easily spread disease organisms to the host. Two of the sucking lice that attack people are the crab louse that infests the hairy parts of the body and is shaped like a tiny wood tick, and the cootie, or body louse. The latter can be found anywhere on the body, but prefers to live in the hair of the head region. Elementary schools regularly check for infestations in their students. The eggs of these lice are quite large and can be easily seen attached to the hair. The eggs or "nits" as they are called, can readily be removed from the hair. Our expression "nit picking" comes from the practice of carefully going through the hair and removing the eggs. It now is meant to signify looking for any tiny fault in a person or thing. Under sanitary conditions, with regular hair and body washing, cooties are seldom a problem, although they can be transmitted from student to student quite easily.

I hope this "lousy" story shed a bit of light onto these tiny creatures that have helped shape human history and economics.

