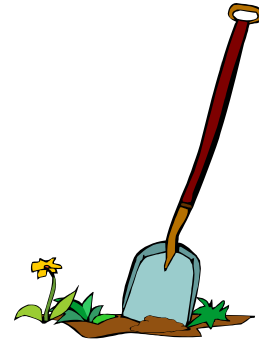


## Our Deceased Animal Composters



The focus for this Buggy Bits is going to result in a somewhat weird and perhaps nauseating topic, so if you do not want to read it, I will understand! The article is really about the insects that take care of the dead animals we so often see lying on the roadway. Without these insects, we would have a world piled up with animal carcasses and would have a great deal of trouble traversing our highways.

One of the beneficial "composters" is the Sarcophagid fly (sarcos = flesh, phagus = eating; a little Greek lesson here!). Sarcophagids normally get to a dead animal soon after it has expired, and the larvae begin their work of composting. Most sarcophagids lay live larvae on their host instead of eggs. I once had buried some fish heads in my garden and was walking near that burial ground when I heard a buzzing sound at my feet. As a good naturalist, I got on my knees and observed a female sarcophagid fly dropping tiny larvae on the spot where I buried the fish heads. She would crawl about, buzzing her wings, stop, drop a larva (which would immediately dig down into the soil to the fish), then she would walk around buzzing and start the ritual all over again. Fascinating!

Some other insects that take care of deceased wild animals are the burying beetles. These 3/4 - 1 inch beetles will excavate underneath a mouse or other small creature and actually bury it under the soil. After it is underground, they will lay their eggs on the critter and the larvae will feed on the interred specimen.

Other beetle larvae, such as the carpet beetles and relatives, feed on hair and feathers of deceased fauna. Once the insects are finished with the specimen, there is really not much left except bones. Many other insects and insect relatives assist in the breakdown of these bones and remaining parts.

Homicide forensic scientists use the types and ages of composting insect specimens found at crime scenes to determine evidence of the time and date of a murder. This evidence is invaluable in police work.

We might say that these composting insects are highly beneficial in a bizarre variety of ways. Hope you are still reading the article to this point ( And who says we insect people are kind of weird?)!!!! Have a wonderful holiday this December!

