

“Lookin’ for Bugs in All the Wrong Places...!”



Tropical insects tend to be either brightly colored or camouflaged and secretive in the lush growth. Some insects have specific seasons when they can be seen, and some, like the boxelder bugs are abundant on our houses in fall and again in spring. These are not the type of “bugs” that we want to focus on in this article. There are many insects that have unusual life histories or habits that make them seem like they should not be where they are.

One of the creatures that pops up unexpectedly is the scorpionfly, which is neither a scorpion nor a fly. This curious insect is in the Order Mecoptera, a rather primitive group that has an elongated face and males have an unusual upturned end of the abdomen with a bulbous tip that gives them the appearance of a scorpion with wings. The strangest thing about them is that they emerge as adults during the winter months and sometimes can be found crawling about on snow a foot or so deep on sunny winter days.

Another unusual place to find insects is at Mono Lake in California. The lake is so saline and full of minerals that large structures (tufa) consisting of salt and minerals grow out of the water. The environment hardly seems to be a place where insects could grow, but there is a species of fly that lives as larvae in the mineral mud and emerge as adults in the summer of the year. Shorebirds flock to the location to gorge on the myriads of brine flies that are present at that time.

Some arthropod residents of unusual places are not actually insects, but spiders. Pycnogonids, or sea spiders live and breathe in the oceans. These creatures have bodies that are very tiny compared to the size of their legs. In fact, the body is so small that the digestive organs cannot fit inside. Instead, the stomach extends into the legs of the spider so it is able to utilize its food. Imagine, a spider living in salt water with a very unusual body plan!

A subgroup of the beetle order, the Stylopids, are quite minute in size, but where they live is very strange. They are parasites on bees and wasps, burrowing into the skin of the hosts between the abdominal segments with only a portion of their bodies exposed to the outside. The male Stylopids have wings and are able to fly about seeking mates. The females, however, do not have legs, wings or eyes and remain attached to the host throughout their lives, producing eggs that hatch into larvae within their bodies and eventually escape to parasitize larval bees and wasps.

As we study nature, we find that the places that some insects reside becomes more and more strange. As Alice in Wonderland said, things just keep getting “curiouser and curiouser”.

Scorpionfly



Pycnogonid

