

# It's Lovebug Season

*Texas A&M AgriLife Extension Service — Galveston County Office*



September 16, 2020



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*News column printed in the Galveston Daily News, The Post, and other Galveston County Newspapers.*



**PHOTO CREDIT: William M. Johnson**

**Swarms of lovebugs are commonly seen from mid-August to September. Although their behavior and their common name may be amusing, their presence in large numbers can be somewhat of a nuisance when driving.**

I received a phone call late last week from a lady asking why so many "Jack & Jills" were covering the exterior of her all-glass storm door?

I figured this was going to be an interesting conversation. When I started in this position 30 years ago, I quickly learned to give a caller time to explain their

problem. This approach is particularly appropriate in this case because I had no idea what Jack & Jills were!

The caller went on to mention that while growing up in Port Arthur, Texas, her parents called these insects Jack & Jills. I asked her to describe them—you might call this stalling for time but I call it exercising

patience in collecting valuable information.

When she mentioned that the insects had jet black bodies with distinctive red- to orange-colored "humps", I immediately thought "Eureka!" based on her notations about masses of insects with distinctive color patterns and





their occurring at this time of year. The insects had to be lovebugs which have been seen in swarms over the past few weeks in some areas of the county.

The common name "lovebug" has been given to these black-bodied flies (with a bright red to orange-colored shoulder area) because they are most often seen flying around as mating pairs. Even though they are more noticeable as swarms, they commonly occur in less concentrated numbers also.

Lovebugs belong to a diverse group of insects known as Diptera which includes many species of flies such as mosquitoes and the houseflies.

Lovebugs were not seen in the United States until the 1940s, when cargo ships traveled from Central America to New Orleans. Since then, Gulf coast states such as Florida, Alabama, Mississippi, Louisiana and Texas have seen lovebugs.

The immature or larval stage of lovebugs develops in moist habitats high in organic matter such as roadside ditches, bayous, and swampy areas. Soon after rainy periods in the spring and especially in the fall in wooded Upper Gulf Coast counties of Texas, lovebugs emerge as adults and mate in swarms around roads and buildings (including houses).

Adult lovebugs spend their time sipping nectar from flowers and searching for mates and mating

while hovering in the air. They do not bite or sting humans.

The immature or larval stage is quite harmless and actually helps nature by decomposing dead plant tissues. Although their behavior and their common name may be amusing, their presence in such large numbers can be somewhat of a nuisance.

Cars and trucks driving through these aerial orgies become spattered with these loving bugs. As a result, radiator fins may become clogged causing cars to overheat. Lovebugs spattered on the windshields can obscure vision.

Be sure to clean off insects that had a head-on collision with your vehicle as soon as possible since their bodies can damage the paint finish if not removed. Use one of the commercially available products containing petroleum distillates advertised to facilitate the removal of dried insect parts from auto finishes.

Because of their harmless biology, broad chemical control using insecticides is not recommended. In fact, it would appear that the major enemy of lovebugs in an urban environment would be cars, trucks and tractor trailers!

Lovebugs are quite seasonal with May and September being the two major time periods to see swarms. Swarms in September tend to be larger than those occurring in May. In some years, swarms may

be small and scattered. In other years, swarms can be huge and commonplace across the county.

Population size is influenced by environmental conditions. Extended periods of high soil moisture levels favor the development of the larval stages, i.e., high populations of lovebugs tend to occur when summer rainfall has been ample. The good news is that lovebug populations are on the decline.

All that can be done is to learn how to cope with lovebug swarms and perhaps marvel a bit at how lovebugs can stay so focused, living up to their amorous reputation despite our inadvertent actions to wipe them out on the highways!

