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Rohnert Park, Cotati, & Penngrove

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The incredible world of insects in our own back yard

By Frederique Lavoipierre
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Prepare to change your view of bugs and creepy crawlies! Did you know that 95 percent of all animal species on earth are insects? Did you know that less than one percent of insects are pests, and that without pollinating insects, there would be no apples, silk, oranges, berries, cotton or chocolate, among other things?

Did you know that insects were making paper hundreds of thousands of years before humans invented it? Did you know that crickets have ears in their knees, or that butterflies taste with their feet?

You have to slow down to really notice insects. Although most people notice a Monarch butterfly glide by, or the metallic blue thread a damselfly weaves through the air, to really know the insects requires patience. Stopping on the trail to look under leaves and on vegetation, watching flower visitors, and peeking under rocks and logs reveals a microcosm to the careful observer.

Where an aphid colony is discovered, there too predatory larvae may be found: Lacewing, lady beetle, flower fly and the bright orange aphid midge. Look again, a bit more closely, and notice that some aphids that have been "mummified" by tiny parasitoid wasps.

The bombardier beetle, if provoked, emits two chemicals that combine in a toxic, audible explosion at over 100 degrees Centigrade, a remarkable lesson in chemistry, right in our own backyard. There is a red ichneumonid wasp that hovers about my garden only on still, warm summer twilights. Where is it the rest of the time? In the early morning, there are bumblebees, laden with dew, asleep in the flowers. Such wonders in our own backyards!

One of the best things about being an insect watcher is that insects are everywhere we go outside. A backyard, in fact, is a fine observatory. The Laguna de Santa Rosa channel, serving as the backyard to the Cotati neighborhood, is the perfect place to make an acquaintance with insects.

The riparian habitat is an ideal place to find insects in the parched heat of August. A creekside meander, magnifier in hand, reveals an enormous diversity of insects in a relatively small area. You won't be alone unless that is what you want. Young friends are always up for an insect hunt.

With frequent visits to the backyard, it is easy to notice seasonal changes. And insects, like plants, have seasons. Dog Day Cicadas are a common example, as adults emerge from the soil in the hot days of summer, after several years as underground larvae.

Other insects too have a season. Monarch butterflies frequent eucalyptus groves along the coast during the winter months. I've learned when to expect the metallic green dock beetle in my garden. I know when to easily find dragonfly nymphs, with their prehensile "lip" that shoots out to capture prey. Summertime is for butterflies and dragonfly adults, and shimmering blue metallic wasps.

Although some insects, such as monarch butterflies, yellow jackets and lady beetles seem to be found almost everywhere, there is plenty of variation. Where nights are warm, a large community of interesting beetles and beautiful moths are found that are not residents where it cools off.

I envy those who have seen lightening bugs, a privilege I haven't had. But I keep my eye out for glow worms when I am on a twilight North Coast hike. I associate some insects with certain places: The campground with the ant lion larvae; the clusters of lady beetles at a different campground. By often visiting your backyard, you can become familiar with a particular community of insects in a unique environment. When you notice how many creatures call your backyard home, it becomes more rather than less, your own, and a place to preserve, protect and enjoy.

Frederique Lavoipierre is a garden and nature freelance writer whose work has been published in Pacific Horticulture, Bay

Nature, the Santa Rosa Press Democrat and San Francisco Chronicle. She offers lectures and workshops on biological and horticultural topics throughout Sonoma County and the Bay Area. She is currently working towards a masters degree in biology at Sonoma State University with an emphasis on garden ecology and entomology.

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