

Crane flies look like Texas-sized mosquitoes

Texas A&M AgriLife Extension Service — Galveston County Office

When does spring arrive here in Galveston County? That depends on whom you ask and how they gauge the arrival of spring.

For some gardeners, the distinctive flush of flowers produced by Texas redbud trees is a sure sign.

For others, it's the delightful smell of grape chewing gum produced by blooms from Texas Mountain Laurels shrubs.

For others, it's the first sighting of bluebonnets and Indian paintbrush flowers along the roadways. (I have been noticing a patch of Indian paintbrush flowers along Duroux Road in La Marque just south of the Gulf Freeway.)

For me, as a horticulturist, it's all of the above and then some as I am an entomologist by way of local necessity and by several classes under William Drew, professor of entomology at Oklahoma State University. Entomology is the study of insects, and the insect that I watch for as a harbinger of spring is the crane fly.

Yep, you heard me correctly. I use crane flies showing up this time of year as a signal that spring has sprung. I now can get into a spring mode by planting some veggies, mowing the lawn (well, what's left of a drought-stricken patch of ground I still call a lawn).



PHOTO BY Dr. William M. Johnson

Despite similarities, crane flies are neither mosquitoes nor mosquito hawks.

At least I'm seeing very encouraging signs that a sufficient number of patches of St. Augustine grass survived the drought and I likely will have a full-fledged lawn later in the spring.

I get numerous questions about this insect during this time of year and their numbers (both the insects and questions asked by local residents) have been in superabundance this year. I can identify this insect without even seeing it, based solely on the description of sometimes apprehensive residents.

The initial question goes something like this: "What is that big insect with the really long legs that looks like a giant Texas mosquito?"

Before I can answer, a follow-up question is often asked: "Do they bite?"

These mosquito-like flies are

called crane flies. Crane flies look like Texas-sized mosquitoes and have been incorrectly called mosquito hawks. (The term "mosquito hawk" generally refers to dragonflies.)

Adult crane flies actually either do not feed at all or feed on nectar from flowers.

Crane flies in this area are tan in color. The body of a crane fly adult measures about ½ inch in length. The body has a narrow abdomen and almost absurdly long legs — some crane flies measure more than 3 inches across from the tip of one leg to the tip of another.

Crane flies are pretty fragile, and although they come equipped with six legs, it's very common to find them missing several legs. Larvae are a grayish-brown color and can be found in compost piles, in the soil or moist environments. They feed on decaying organic matter but



February 22, 2012



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

sometimes feed on the roots of plants.

Crane flies can be a nuisance pest indoors when they are attracted to porch lights and move inside when the door is opened. Try using yellow bug bulbs in porch lights, which attract fewer insects.

You're likely to be familiar with this insect as you likely have encountered a heap of their dead bodies by the entrance-way to your front door or resting on a brick wall or window screen.

Some residents report clusters of crane flies flying about the front door of their home, awaiting an opportunity to gain entry.

I normally have the challenge of coming up with a digital photo to accompany my columns.

Sometimes this is a problem but not so for this week's column. All I had to do was step outside and look around in my yard or stroll down the neighborhood sidewalks to get as many photos as I need.

Spiders notwithstanding, crane flies rank high on the list of uninvited critters which cause the most bedlam in a home.

Attracted by the light inside the house, they fly in the open window or door and start to flap against lampshades or walls. However, they are medically harmless as they do not sting, suck or transmit disease pathogens.

The main thing to remember is that the adult stage of crane flies is harmless. In fact, their biology is such that their contribution to our ecosystem is largely beneficial because the larvae feed on decaying-organic matter and thus assist in the biological decomposition process.

