

Texas A&M AgriLife Extension Service — Galveston County Office



PHOTO CREDIT: Dr. William M. Johnson

Homeowners across the county have reported an abundance of flying insects known as crane flies. Despite similarities, crane flies are neither mosquitoes nor mosquito hawks.

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 moun-

tain laurel 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 undergraduate classes under the tutelage Dr. William Drew, Professor of Entomology at Oklahoma State University. Entomology is the study of insects and the insect that I watch



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Dr. William Johnson is a horticulturist with the Galveston County Office of Texas A&M AgriLife Extension Service. Visit his website at <http://aggie-horticulture.tamu.edu/galveston>.

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for as a harbinger of spring is the crane fly.

Yes, you read that correctly. I use crane flies showing up this time of year as a signal that spring has sprung. I can now get into full spring gardening mode by planting some veggies and mowing the lawn (well, what's left of my St. Augustine lawn grass after the freezing temperatures last month).

I get numerous inquiries about the overabundance of giant mosquito-like insects occurring in local landscapes during this time of 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 indeed look like Texas-sized mosquitoes and have been incorrectly called mosquito hawks. (The term "mosquito hawk" generally refers to dragonflies.)

Adult crane flies live for only a few days and 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 1/2 inch in length. Crane flies have almost absurdly long legs that can measure over 3 inches across from the tip of one leg to the tip of another.

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

Some residents report clusters of crane flies flying about the front door of their home, awaiting an opportunity to gain entry into the home with you. Crane flies are strongly attracted to outdoor lights at night including porch lights.

I normally have the challenge of coming up with a digital photo to accompany my news columns. Sometimes this is a problem but not so for this week's column. All I had to do was step outside of my office in Carbide Park. Crane flies were so abundant a few days ago that several flew into my car for a free ride home to meet their cousins.

The main thing to remember is that the immature and adult stages of crane flies are 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.

Upcoming Seminars

WHAT: Tomato Stress Management
WHEN: 9:00 - 11:00 a.m., Saturday, March 17
SPEAKER: Master Gardener Ira Gervais

WHAT: Home Composting
WHEN: 1:00 - 3:00 p.m., Saturday, March 17
SPEAKER: Master Gardener Jim Gilliam

Both seminars will be conducted at the Galveston County AgriLife Extension Office located in Carbide Park (4102-B Main Street) in La Marque. Pre-registration required by e-mail (galvcountymgs@gmail.com) or phone (281-309-5065).

