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Lovebugs

As you drive down the highways of the southern United States, you may encounter a nuisance in the form of splattered insects on your windshield, hood, and radiator grill. The nuisance may occur in joined pairs that are less than an inch long. These insects on your automobile are called lovebugs or honeymoon flies, a fitting name due to their unique mating flights. Lovebugs are in a large group of insects more properly known as March flies. Over 200 types of March flies are found worldwide, but only two occur in the United States.–Only one is a nuisance causing extreme problems for motorists. While adult lovebugs do not bite or sting or cause disease, they can clog automobile engines causing them to overheat. They can reduce visibility on windshields when their bodies are splattered or spread by windshield wipers, and they can damage paint finishes when their acidic body fluids are left on a vehicle.

Photo: James Castner, University of Florida

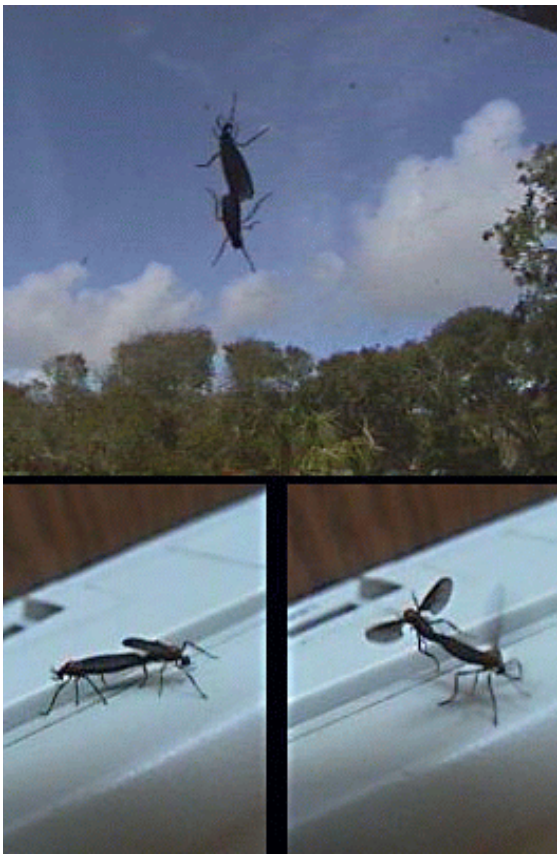
Photo: Timothy A. Mousseau

Lovebug mating flights are interesting. Major flights occur twice a year, around May and September, for four weeks each time. Mating takes place soon after lovebugs become adults. Six or more males may be attracted to the same female, swarming around her in flight during the daytime. When the successful male unites with the female, they remain connected for many hours often still in flight, until the female either rubs him off or releases him. During their

mating flight, the male transfers nutrients to the female to help her produce healthy eggs. After mating is completed, the female lays eggs and dies soon after. The average life span of a female lovebug is only 2-3 days, but can be extended another day or so if she has the energy to make another mating flight.

Each female lovebug lays 150 to 600 eggs beneath decaying plant material. When they hatch, the larvae live close to the surface, turning the decayed material into nutrients that growing plants can use. Rotting grass clippings along the highways are a perfect habitat for lovebug larvae. The females will also lay eggs beneath cow manure, helping with its decomposition.

There are no government or community efforts to control lovebugs with insecticides. It is impractical to use sprays that only keep the insects cleared away for very short periods, especially when the insecticides have a negative impact on other daytime flyers such as honeybees. However, there are many predators that readily feed on lovebugs like birds, small animals, and even other insects.

There are a few strategies that motorists can use to reduce their contact with mating flights of lovebugs.

Since lovebugs are active during the daytime from about 10:00 a.m. until dusk, planning driving trips in the early evening or at night can be helpful. Traveling at slower speeds can reduce the number of lovebugs that splatter on the car. Also placing a screen or protective cover on the grill of the car will protect the radiator from clogging and will protect the paint finish on the front of the car. Paint damage to cars is lessened if a car is well-waxed. Splattered lovebugs should be removed within a day or so to prevent permanent damage.

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EIIS/HS-44 (New 08/2004).