

Conservation Corner

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Happy Independence Day! We hope everyone has a safe, fun holiday celebrating our nation's birthday. And if your celebrations include fishing, swimming, or boating activities, we trust everyone will take every precaution to stay safe on the water. In our area, especially, many creeks and rivers have reached flood stage and beyond and are flowing too fast and high for safe fishing, swimming, kayaking, or canoeing.

Speaking of water activities, during one of our recent downpours, one of the guys walked in my office with a huge insect and the invariable question, "Corinne, do you know what this is?" For once, I did, as a farmer had brought in the same insect a couple years ago – a giant water bug – and this week's encounter with nature.

Giant water bugs are members of the Hemiptera order of insects that also includes cicadas, aphids, leafhoppers, and shield bugs. Often called the true bugs, they have piercing and sucking mouth parts. While most feed on plant sap, some are parasites and others, like today's subject, are predators. Most true bugs are land dwellers, but some call water home. In fact, some of our most familiar aquatic insects belong to this order – giant water bugs, water boatmen, backswimmers, and water striders.

Giant water bugs are the largest insects in the order, growing up to 2 1/2 inches in length. Their flat, oval-shaped bodies are colored the dark brown of dead leaves. In fact, they often play dead in the water to avoid being eaten themselves. Unlike many insects, giant water bugs care for their young. Females of some species guard the eggs they have laid along the edge of the water. In many species, the female glues over a hundred eggs to the back of the male, who then carries the eggs around with him until they hatch and begin the stages of simple metamorphosis.

Giant water bugs prefer the clear, slow-moving waters of freshwater streams and ponds. Aggressive predators, they readily attack small fish, frogs, snakes, and insects. Lying in wait among the water plants, these ambush hunters grasp their prey with their strong front legs. They then pierce its skin with their sharp beak, injecting a powerful saliva that digests the body tissues. Finally, they suck up dinner through their straw-like proboscis.

Giant water bugs are strong fliers and drawn to light sources at night so are often found some distance from bodies of water. Perhaps you've found one clattering about helplessly on your porch or the pavement of lighted parking lots.

Unlike some true bugs, giant water bugs are harmless and interesting, causing no harm to crops, structures, people, or pets, and they will not reproduce or establish indoors. They can give a painful bite, however, earning them their nickname Toe-biter. Giant water bugs are eaten by some native North Americans and are considered a delicacy in Southeast Asia. I think our family will stick to hamburgers and hot dogs for our 4th of July picnic.



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