



WILDLIFE NOTES

THE CONENOSE BEDBUG

We know it is wrong to anthropomorphize nature, to give it human attributes. Insects in particular cannot be held morally accountable for their actions, since—without a brain or nervous system to speak of—they find it hard to distinguish right from wrong. Thus no insect is evil in the usual sense of the word.

There is, of course, an exception to this rule.

The conenose (*Triatoma spp.*) is a venomous "bed bug" that lives predominantly in deserts and grasslands. The black or brown conenose is about 1/2 inch to one inch long and roughly resembles a boxelder bug. It has an elongated, cone-shaped head with mouth parts designed to pierce skin and suck blood.



Part of the Reduviidae family, the conenose also has such descriptive aliases as the vampire bug, kissing bug, assassin bug, Mexican bed bug, and Walpai tiger. Conenoses usually frequent rodent nests, especially those of packrats. In early and mid-summer, they also invade human households.

Before attacking and sucking its quota of blood, the conenose waits until its victim is asleep. Then, in the dead of night, the insect emerges from its hiding place under the bed or within the closet. As befits its vampirish reputation, the conenose has wings and can also drop from the ceiling or enter the bedroom through a window.

In the morning the bug is gone, and a painful, itchy bite remains. This welt usually reaches a diameter of 1/2 inch to three inches, but many people react more severely to the insect's venom. The affected area may swell alarmingly, and some individuals have systemic symptoms such as nausea, rapid heartbeats, trembling, or rapid breathing. Reactions can worsen with each bite. In addition, the "kissing bug" often defecates as it bites, and the released material can carry harmful organisms or parasites.

When victims do awake at the time of attack, they commonly leap into the air and slap frantically at the bite, the bed and nearby family members. This is not recommended, since it spreads the defecated material into the wound if the bug has been smashed. A more prudent course (nearly impossible to follow) is to avoid killing the insect while it is attached to human flesh.

It does not help to know that the conenose's urge to suck blood is directly related to its mating needs. As with black widow spiders, it is the female who is the object of disapproval. After her protein-filled meal, the conenose lays her whitish oval eggs. The small brown nymphs will take up to two years to become adults.

Prevention of a conenose attack includes repairing torn screens and eliminating favorite hiding places, such as woodpiles or boxes of clothing. The best preparation is to get a cat. From a conenose's point of view, a home with mice or rats is a happy home.

The stealth of the conenose's attack, its general feeding habits, and the unpredictable painfulness of its bite are bad enough. But the "kiss" can also transmit the dangerous parasite that causes Chagas' disease in humans. Cases of this debilitating illness are well known in Mexico and South America: The microorganism eventually can invade the human blood system and migrate into tissues of the heart, spleen, and lymph nodes. The same or similar parasite has been found in conenoses in the United States, and in 1984 one supermarket tabloid ran a lurid account of the "vampire bug" and a three-year-old Texas boy diagnosed with Chagas' Disease. Charles Darwin is thought to have suffered from this lingering disease, acquiring it in 1835 in western Argentina.

Such accounts remain in the area of sensationalism, but for most people the bite of the conenose is simply a glorified mosquito bite.