

'They're in everything': Bug outbreak irks California towns

August 21 2015, byTami Abdollah



In this Aug. 14, 2015, photo provided by Matthew Hengst, bugs swarm at a service station in the eastern Sierra Nevada town of Lone Pine, Calif. Scientists are calling the unusual explosion of this *Melacoryphus lateralis* species of seed bug the first outbreak of its kind in California's recent memory. (Matthew Hengst via AP)

The gas station's ground was covered with the small winged bugs. Piles of carcasses, inches deep, sat swept to the sides.

On the road, they rained onto car windshields. They flew by the

thousands toward even the smallest sources of light, and crept along windows and kitchen tables.

Such has been the skin-crawling reality for the past two months in the high-desert communities at the foot of the Sierra Nevada's eastern slopes, where residents have seen an explosion of the black-and-red seed bug species *Melacoryphus lateralis*.

"They're in everything. There's no way to get rid of them or eradicate them. They're just here," said Blair Nicodemus, 33, of Lone Pine, while driving with a bug creeping on his windshield. "Sometimes there will be these micro-plumes that'll come through where there will be just thousands of them, and they'll be all over you. ... I'm sure I've eaten at least two dozen, because they get into your food."

Such outbreaks have happened in Arizona's Sonoran desert near Tucson, but scientists say it's the first one they have record of in California.

The influx has been driven by a mild winter and monsoonal weather, which provided healthier vegetation for the nutrient-sucking bugs, said David Haviland, an entomologist with the University of California Cooperative Extension in Kern County.

The bugs' flight into town and toward the lights in homes, businesses or cars, however, might be related to the drying up of native vegetation in the summer heat and the drought, said Nathan Reade, agricultural commissioner for Inyo and Mono counties.



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The fingernail-sized insects are the main topic of conversation in the area.

A printout in a hotel lobby in a Lone Pine motel warned people to keep

their doors shut at night, and a hotel worker advised people to keep their car windows up if lights are on. A Dollar General Store in Inyokern limited its store hours after dark to avoid dealing with the bugs.

Lia Sensanbaugh of Inyokern doesn't turn on her lights when at home. "I've got them real bad," she said. "I've been living off my TV light for about a month and a half."

Gas stations and rest areas along Highway 395—a roadway that crosses through sparsely populated and rural areas—are prime bug targets because of their lights. After dark, the bugs swirl like surreal artwork below the Pearsonville Shell gas station's overhead lights.

"Millions, tens, twenty, we can't count it," gas station owner Soma Praba said. "At night time, if you go into the station, they'll follow. They go everywhere. They get on your body, your head."

Each morning Praba's workers have spent three hours sweeping the ground and using a leaf blower to clear away piles of the bugs. Around eight times a day, workers will sweep, discovering two hours later that the same amount of bugs are back, Praba said with frustration.



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Spraying insecticide hasn't helped, Praba said, and exterminators have been equally stymied. The only reprieve seems to be a windy day and the recent smoke from fires.

"We are tired of it," Praba said. "I am waiting for the first snow to come."

At a Lone Pine gas station this week, the side of the building was covered with bugs, and a woman was hosing off the wall, despite the drought, said Kathi Hall, who owns the town's Mt. Whitney Restaurant with her husband.

Ridgecrest Mayor Peggy Breeden said some people in town use umbrellas while getting gas because of the swarms overhead. She's fielded many dozens of concerned calls and never seen anything like this in her 33 years there.

She put together a notice this week to post around town explaining to visitors that the bugs are a harmless nuisance in the hopes that they'll return when the bugs die down.

That said, Breeden joked, "If frogs come, we're all leaving."

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