

Insects

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Watch out!

Mosquitoes are here in force

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The 1986 mosquito season has gotten off to a "stinging" start, with the county Environmental Health Department saying the problem is one-third to one-half worse than normal. And there's no relief in sight.

Environmental Health Director Diane Evans says the annual mosquito problem is worse this year due to the combination of heavy winter rains and warm spring weather. The result has been standing, stagnant water throughout the county — ideal breeding conditions for the biting bugs.

And there is no way for Santa Cruz County to get relief. The area does not have a mosquito-abatement program like one in the San Joaquin Valley.

While humans are irritated by the pests, animals — in particular, dogs — have a more vital problem. Heartworm disease, which is transmitted by mosquitoes, can be fatal to dogs unless caught in time. Local veterinarians are recommending dog owners get their pets on a preventive treatment program.

Evans says a single resource worker in her department is handling four to six calls per week from suffering residents. While she wouldn't guess the number of complaints per week,

Evans estimated the problem is "one-third to one-half worse than normal."

Evans says the problem "generally seems to be spread throughout the county." However, the mountain areas of Lompico and Bonny Doon seem to have been hit particularly hard by so-called "tree-hole" mosquitoes, which breed in the hollows of trees. Parts of Watsonville also have been traditional problem areas.

"It's much worse this year," agrees Shirley Brown of the Rural Bonny Doon Association. "You can't go walking at dusk or you run into swarms of them. They'll eat you alive."

The problem has become so bad that Brown is in the process of screening her outside deck.

"But we're only halfway through," she says. "We wanted to brace for them this year, but they hit too fast."

A secretary at Bonny Doon Elementary School told The Sentinel, "I just killed one before you called." She agreed that the problem is "much worse than normal," particularly for her since a creek runs past her home.

According to Gail Grodhaud, a public health biologist with the state Department of Health Services in Berkeley, the mosquito

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problem will continue to get worse as summer wears on.

Grodhaud says that while there are some 1,700 types of mosquitoes — which are actually a sub-order of flies — California is affected by about 46 species. About a dozen are really troublesome for humans, he adds.

No matter what species, though, only the female mosquito bites. They do so to provide protein so they can lay eggs. When biting, they inject some of the enzyme used to digest the donated blood. When a person scratches the wound, this enzyme spreads under the skin and causes swelling.

The often-asked question of why one person is bitten by a mosquito while another person nearby is not, can be answered either in simple, or technical, terms.

Grodhaud says simply that some people "smell better" to mosquitoes. Others, however, say some people discharge more carbon dioxide, which attracts the pests. Other people "sleep warmer" and, therefore, will get bitten more.

Grodhaud warns that controlled experiments also have proved that mosquitoes are attracted by scent, so it is best to avoid wearing perfume or after-shave lotion when traveling into an infested area.

While Santa Cruz County has mosquito problems, it is much less a problem here than other areas — particularly the San Joaquin Valley, says Grodhaud. Mosquito-abatement districts have been formed in those areas, and ponds are periodically drained and treated with fog pesticides.

Lowell Rau, a senior public health sanitarian with the local Environmental Health Department, notes the closest mosquito-abatement district is in Salinas. The districts operate similarly to

assessment districts for roadway improvements, except that property owners are assessed fees for mosquito spraying.

Residents of one area in Watsonville looked into forming such a district last year, but backed off because of the costs, Rau says.

According to Evans, the public can reduce the problem by eliminating breeding sources. She says that any residue of water, such as that collected in an old tire, be removed. Any unused containers should be turned upside down, and standing drainage areas eliminated.

Rau adds that eliminating weeds from waterways can help reduce shade and stagnant water, both of which are mosquito breeding sources.

Veterinarians Michael Shumate of the Animal Clinic of Santa Cruz and Kat Midtling of Scotts Valley Veterinary Clinic say the heartworm problem continues to be "steady" in the area. Midtling says she's treating two cases a week now.

They say heartworm disease produces worms that live in the tissues around a dog's heart and adjacent blood vessels. While not normally fatal, by the time symptoms show up, damage to vital organs may be so severe that the dog cannot be saved.

They urge dog owners to have a simple blood sample test conducted for their pets. They also should be placed on an inexpensive, preventive treatment program, which means daily pills or liquid for the animal.

Some 80 percent of Midtling's dog patients and 50 percent of Shumate's patients are already on such a program.

"Basically, it costs about \$1 a month for this preventive treatment," Shumate says. "This is in comparison to \$250 to treat a dog if it gets heartworm."