

Year of the Fly



2019 is International Year of the Fly; I don't know why, it's the year of the fly! It is so decreed by the International Congress of Dipterology, and endorsed by the UK's Dipterists Forum.

For many years I worked on Diptera (true flies) at the Natural History Museum. I was mainly involved with the midge and crane fly sort of flies, but also some groups of flies that are parasitic on birds and mammals (especially bats). There are currently c.7000 fly species recognised for the UK, I'm not sure what the world total is, but for instance, the crane flies (or daddy long-legs) include c.350 UK species compared with c.13,000 world species (10,000 described by one man!).

The Year of the Fly is intended to encourage a better attitude to flies and to recognise their interest and value. And indeed their diversity and behaviour is amazing. Around the world they range in size from 0.4mm to c.70mm, and the shape and colour varies enormously. There is frequent reference to bees and butterflies as pollinators, but there are thousands of flies that are important pollinators. True, there are flies that enjoy a bit of muck, but that's just as well – they do a great job of tidying up after us, and these or their relatives have their uses medicinally and by the police in forensic entomology. The House Fly is the subject of one of Lynn Truss' very funny monologues in her *Rumblings from the Rafters*. Many flies are important for pest control. And flies can provide food: in certain African lakes huge numbers of emerging lake fly midges appear like smoke clouds; many are collected and compressed into a sort of dough for eating later as Kungu Cake.

This swarming of flies is quite a widespread feature and even in the UK, fire-engines have been called out to swarms of midges hovering above trees and mistaken for smoke. If you sit by a stream you can watch swarms of male dance flies dashing up and down just above the water surface. Females enter the swarm and are picked off by a male for mating. He might give her a small prey item as food, and he may wrap that up in a silken parcel for the female to unravel. But, of course, there are unscrupulous males that will just wrap up a small stone or even nothing at all. A related long-legged fly collects in numbers on the edges of ponds. It is shiny green and the males have white wing tips

which they keep flashing and they do amazing leaps in all directions, in an attempt to attract a mate.

At the time of writing, the UK Fly of the Month is the St Mark's Fly, a largish black fly that rather drifts around in numbers, trailing its large hind legs below the body. St Mark's Day is 25 April and round here the fly appeared about two days late this year.

Late summer sees the arrival of migrants, notably hover flies, but including less obvious flies (such as shore flies). Sometimes they migrate in large numbers and when they see something brightly coloured on the beach, they land on it hoping it might be a flower – much to the consternation of the sun-bather. The versatility of flies is amazing. There is a fly that lives on horses and appears quite a normal fly. Its relative on deer starts off with wings but sheds them when it finds a host and the related sheep ked has lost its wings all together. The same family has some fairly normal looking flies on birds, but those that live on swifts and house martins (birds that return to the same site to breed) consider their wings a nuisance and so they are reduced to small non-functional pads. The bat flies are even more bizarre, having lost their wings completely, the thorax is extremely modified and with long legs, these appear like spiders scurrying around in the fur of the bat. We have three species but only one is fairly common on one bat species, another is extinct in the UK, and the third is very rare on a very rare bat species.

There's so much to be said in favour of flies – give them a chance.

Tony Hutson