

# Dancing with flies



Many insect species form swarms that dance in the air. They seem to form a column and the individuals move up and down within the column, but it is really impossible to follow the movements of any one individual. They are generally focused on a marker, which is often at the bottom of the column, but where they are swarming in a bit of dappled sunlight the marker may be above them. The marker may not be fixed and, indeed, it may be you as you walk across a field. Various species of flies are perhaps the most common swarmers, and for the most part the dancers are males. Females enter the swarm and team up with a male and they drop out of the swarm to mate. But there is a lot of discussion about whether this is the sole or even main reason for the behaviour.

Actually, the first dancers I look out for in the spring are not a species of fly, but a moth species. The so-called longhorn moths are quite small (c15mm long) but characterised by really glossy iridescent wings and antennae that are up to four times the length of the body and have a distinctive white tip. They dance around in small swarms in sunlight over bushes or small trees, particularly of oak, hazel and birch.

Midges, particularly the non-biting chironomid midges, can form huge aggregations associated with water. They will form major swarms that drift around over the trees and look like smoke – indeed they have been the cause of many a false alarm for the fire service. A related group in Africa, the ‘lake flies’, emerge in such vast numbers that they are collected up and pressed into a large wadge as food, called Kungu cake.

The so-called dance flies are often to be seen dashing up and down just above the surface of a patch of water of a stream or lake. These are predaceous flies, and in some species the males have a prey item ready to give to the female, to occupy her during the mating process. Some even wrap up the gift in silk. But, of course, some cheat, and the female may spend time unwrapping her parcel only to find a small stone inside – or nothing at all. Another species strongly associated with water is a long-legged fly that doesn't have a common name, but who could forget its scientific name of *Poecilobothrus nobilitatus*! This forms large aggregations on the surface of

water overgrown with vegetation or on the muddy margins. The glossy green larger males are continually leaping sideways, back and forth, and flashing the shiny white tips to their wings – irresistible.

More sedate are the small crane flies (which include the larger daddy-long-legs) that just dance round in the dappled sunlight beneath trees at the bottom of the garden in the evening. Some soldier flies do the same thing and it may be a way of showing their bright body colours, which are covered by the wings when at rest. The crane flies will carry on late into the autumn and are also out quite early in the spring. And there is never a time when there are no insects dancing – even in winter the winter gnats (similar to crane flies) continue to form little swarms under trees or by hedges whenever the sun is out.

One might expect that these aggregations would attract predators, but on the whole the dancers are left strictly alone. There are, of course, other circumstances when large aggregations of insects appear. These include the cluster flies that gather in house roofs to hibernate, the mass emergences of insects such as some beetles and other flies, and migration. There are many quite small insects that migrate in vast numbers and which can be particularly obvious on a beach in August. Smaller flies such as the seaweed fly and the smaller shore flies, ladybird beetles and hoverflies can come in off the sea in clouds, and a big influx of two or three hoverfly species in the garden is easy to notice at that time of year. But that's another story.

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