

Crane Flies

by Lloyd Eighme, retired entomologist

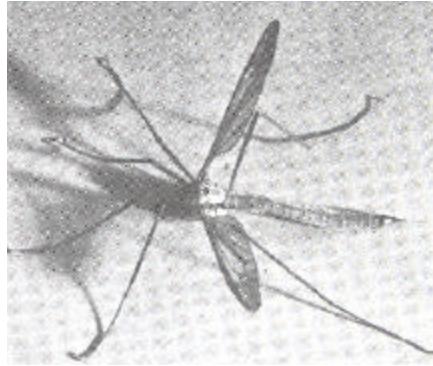
One of the largest families in the order Diptera (2-winged flies) is the Crane fly family Tipulidae. The term tipula is a Latin word originally used to describe the long-legged water striders, but the entire crane fly family is characterized by long spindly legs, so this term is very appropriate for their family name. There are more than 1500 species of crane flies in North America. I do not know how many different species we have in Skagit County, but I know of six and I am certain there are many more than that. There is a giant that is 3 inches across with wings and legs spread out. Then there are tiny ones less than 1/4 inch across. Some are plain tan colored with no markings, some have white stripes on the body and mottled wings.

Crane fly larvae live in damp soil or leaf litter where they feed mostly on decayed vegetation. Only a few feed on the live roots of plants and one of those, the European Crane fly (Tipula paludosa) was imported to the state of Washington from Europe and has been a pest here since 1970. Read EB 0856 for information on detection and treatment. Most crane fly larvae are part of nature's compost system, recycling nutrients from dead vegetation back to the soil. The adults are bothersome, flying to lights at night and coming into the house, but they do not bite or sting. They have been called mosquito hawks giving the impression that they eat mosquitoes, but they rarely eat anything and only live a few days. Many of them are eaten by bats, mice and birds so they are an important link in the food chain. There is a winter crane fly that flies only during the winter months and provides food for our overwintering songbirds like the winter wren. There is a small wingless species (Chionea) that can be seen crawling on the surface of the snow. Hopefully, some of you skiers will bring me one for the insect collection.

My childhood interest in insects was spurred on by books like "Grassroot Jungles" by Edwin Way Teale. When I read about the Phantom Crane Fly my imagination was running and I wondered if I would ever get to see one of these elusive creatures. It was 50 years later when I was working at our spring in the dense underbrush on a warm summer day that I saw six small white spots moving in formation in front of my face. Was something going wrong with my eyes or was I suffering from heat exhaustion? As the six white spots moved slowly through the air from the dense shade into a shaft of sunlight, I could see better and guess what it was. The phantom crane fly! Finally, after all those years and there it was. It's dark colored body was not visible in the dim light, only the six white feet could be seen. I have seen others since then, so I know they are not rare, just rarely seen. I am still enjoying the thrill of discovery in the insect world and there is so much yet to discover.



Adult Male



Adult Female