

March Fly by Lloyd Eighme, retired entomologist

A few years ago a news reporter called me from the Skagit Valley Herald office in Mount Vernon with questions about flies that seemed to be invading the city. People were calling the newspaper office (they should have been calling Master Gardeners) wanting to know what was happening and where the swarms of flies were coming from. I could not tell from the description over the phone which one of hundreds of different kinds of flies those could be. The reporter believed it was an urgent situation and saw the chance of a good story, so she brought a specimen to my house so I could identify it and explain what was happening. It was early spring, so I suspected it was the March fly, but I needed to see a specimen before I dared to make a statement that would be published.

The March fly (*Bibio nervosus*) is distinctive and widespread and not difficult to identify, but why were they suddenly appearing in the city in swarms? The larvae are known to feed on the roots of grasses and the adult flies emerge in early spring, hence the name March fly, even though it is usually April when we see them flying in Skagit County. The day of the "great invasion" in the city of Mount Vernon, was a warm spring day with a strong wind coming from the Southwest. The March flies are weak flyers and easily carried by the wind. There are some large areas of grass and sod southwest of Mount Vernon and that is most likely where the flies were coming from, but why in numbers greater than anyone remembered seeing before?

Insect populations fluctuate widely from year to year depending on many factors such as weather, predators, and available food. Sometimes populations build up gradually from year to year, but they can also explode suddenly as it seems to have happened with the March flies. Fortunately these flies are only a nuisance since they neither bite nor sting and they live only a few days. Their flight involves mating and frequently the males and females are seen coupled in flight. In some parts of the country they are called "love bugs" for that reason. Sometimes they emerge in such dense swarms as to be a traffic hazard as they cover the windshield and make the road slippery.

Every year at apple blossom time I see March flies visiting the flowers to sip nectar. They might even pollinate some blossoms, but they are not considered an important insect for pollination. The larvae are not known to do serious damage by feeding on the roots of grass or other plants. This is another insect to go in the file of neither beneficial nor harmful, just interesting.



The March Fly that invaded
Mount Vernon. (the female)



The March Fly that
invaded Mount Vernon.
(the male)