



Musing

July 2021 - "Bad Bugs....?"

Anne Torrey, Lower Eau Claire Lake

It was hot and muggy and we'd just returned from a vigorous hike on one of our beautiful local trails. Sitting on the deck, drinking wine and reminiscing with my husband about the perfect day, I was lazily petting my "good dog!" Tug, and felt something near his ear. Uh oh, a tick - ICK! I quickly pulled it off and disposed of it. Quite certain he would need consoling after this traumatic discovery, I was giving him a nice tummy rub when, oh no, MORE ticks! Multiples of the little critters, both large and small, all over our poor doggy! We went on a search and destroy mission to rid our sweet baby of the nasty interlopers, thinking he must have run through a couple of nests in order to have that many all over him. The whole time we were searching and picking the ticks off of him, we were besieged by mosquitoes, taking advantage of our relatively stationary positions to have a snack at our expense. What a sight we were, picking and swatting and cussing the attack of the insects on the 3 of us, our relaxing post-exertion moments in the forest all but lost and forgotten. Why, WHY must these ticks and mosquitoes torment us? What good are they!? How can we get rid of them!?

Not wanting to harbor negative thoughts for too long, lest they destroy my inner Zen with nature, I decided to try to find an answer to my questions, and this is what I discovered:

Both ticks and mosquitoes are a food source and as it happens, are important components of the food chain. Ticks are a primary dietary source for birds, snakes, frogs, toads and other reptiles. Mosquitoes, in all stages from little aquatic larvae to winged adult, are crucial components to the diets of dragonflies, bats and birds, as well as turtles, frogs and spiders.

In answer to my distressed query, "What good are they!?", I found surprisingly, that they are actually quite important in a number of ways.

Ticks are known in scientific circles as "disease vectors" - through their proclivity to carry disease, they aid in population control of wildlife. They help to weed out the weaker animals that are incapable of fighting off tick borne illnesses in order to prevent overpopulation of deer, rabbits, mice and other creatures, which may upset the ecological balance of things. They are also an ecosystem indicator. If scientists note an exceptionally high tick population, it could indicate a reduced number of a predator population (i.e., frogs), which in turn could affect another important food source, say, fish, that may need to consume the frogs in order to exist themselves.

(I am now humming the song from Lion King “The Circle of Life.”)

Equally important to their place in nature’s balance, unfortunately, is the pesky mosquito. Of the 3500 species, only a few bite and consume blood. These are only female and only feed on humans at egg-laying time. In fact, mosquitoes are great pollinators and crucial to certain varieties of flowers. Who would have thought that there are several species of orchids in the wild that would not exist if the mosquito were to disappear!?

So the answer to my final question, “How can we get rid of them!?” is, we don’t. And we shouldn’t try. There are several ways to combat their negative effects on our enjoyment of the great outdoors, however. Here are some suggestions:

We should remove potential breeding spots from our yards and gathering areas. It takes 5-7 days for a mosquito to gestate from larvae into a winged, adult, blood sucking pest, so we should interrupt this cycle by emptying bird baths, water-filled buckets, etc., every 2-3 days. Keep our gutters clean and covered with netting. We can also support and attract their predators with fun projects like building bat houses and bird houses. (Include the kiddos!) Encourage dragonflies by planting flowers they love like Black-Eyed Susans, Goldenrod, Bee Balm, and other herbs and plants that you would essentially place in a butterfly garden. As far as tick reduction or prevention, this may be a bit more challenging. The most intriguing suggestion I found was to raise some type of bird in your yard like guinea fowl, or chickens. This might not be entirely practical, so my suggestion would be if you are going into the woods or tall grasses in the height of tick season, cover yourself well, use some insect repellent or as a more natural alternative, some eucalyptus oil on any exposed skin. And it goes without saying we can have a little fun with some serious tick checking when we get home!

As I muse over what we must endure to live in and near our beautiful lakes and woods, I understand that there will always be pesky critters out there. All belong to nature, and the best we can and should do is to try to live in harmony because in some way, shape, or form, we need one another.

Happy July!