



The fascinating world of insects! Something to spark your interest.

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When it comes to the insect world, the statement, “dynamite comes in small packages,” tallies in a number of ways. When discussing wildlife, many times we do not immediately think of insects. We think about the Big Five, then some of the smaller game and some big wild birds as well as their habitat, but rarely do insects come into their mind, contrary to the mention of the word pest. Yet insects, their characteristics and impacts can totally blow your mind!

Although there is a lot we still do not know about insects, here are some facts we do know:-

- There are more insects in three square kilometres of healthy rural land than there are human beings on the entire planet.
- That is more than 200 million insects for each human on earth.
- There are more than 900 000 species of insects that have been discovered and there are yet more new species to be discovered.
- Of the 900 000 odd species of insects, beetles, order Coleoptera are the most represented with about 350 000 species. Each species has unique, interesting characteristics which enable them to carry out their roles in the ecosystem.
- In Zimbabwe, the Natural History Museum has a great collection of insects both dry, pinned and wet collections, representing 22 orders of the class Insecta. A lot of phenomenal scientists worked hard over many years to build this collection from as far back as 1902 to date.
- Many different insects have defence mechanisms, examples are the beautiful Monarch butterflies, these are very common in Zimbabwe, and they feed on poisonous sap of the milkweed plant and that makes their predators sick. This is their natural defence mechanism. This also results in mimicry of colours and patterns by other vulnerable butterfly species.
- Some say beetles taste like apples, wasps like pine, termites like peanut butter and worms like fried bacon. Certainly insects are eaten by many people in Zimbabwe.
- Many insects are known for using camouflage as a defence or survival mechanism, among them are the head lice whose adults colour depend on the colour of the host's hair.
- The fastest runners are the cockroaches scurrying a top speed of 5.4km/hr (About 50 body lengths/second!!).
- The fastest flight speed is not found in birds, but in Tabanid flies (Horse flies which are common in Zimbabwe) which fly at 145 kilometres per hour, much faster than the fastest land mammal, the cheetah which has a top speed of 120km/hr.
- Cockroaches give the impression they are always eating because they seem to always appear in places where crumbs of food are left and not cleaned up, but cockroaches can actually survive for a month without eating anything but would die within 9 days if they went without water.
- Termites are a very interesting group of social insects and their production is particularly interesting, they only have one queen per colony at any given time. This fat, wingless queen is responsible for laying all the eggs and can lay between 6 000 and 7 000 eggs per day! And still on average a queen termite can live for 15 to 50 years. That seems a bit unfair if you compare with the lifespan of a dragonfly which has a lifespan of 24 hours.
- If number of lenses was equal to quality of eyesight, dragonflies would beat humans because while we only have one lens, they have 30 000 lenses in each eye.
- Only the female mosquitoes ever bite people as the male feed on plant juices.
- Did you know that not all sounds made by insects are vocalisations? For example, the sharp sound made by crickets is produced by adult male crickets from the rustling of their wings?
- If you have visited Chirinda forest in the Eastern Highlands, you will realise that it's an amazing evergreen forest with so many breathtaking creepy crawlies. Of interest are the army ants. These are known to form large colonies of up to 70 000 members and when they are threatened or feel threatened, they tend to attack. A story is told of a central African man who was attacked by these ants while sleeping and woke up with the whole swarm all over and because of these little creatures a whole village was deserted.
- Of all the deaths caused by living things to humans worldwide, insects are still in the top ten with mosquitoes being the highest contributor but only because they are vectors of disease causing pathogens of Malaria, yellow fever, dengue fever among others. The assassin bug is also a high contributor here.
- There are some insects that are found exclusively in Africa, the tsetse-fly is one of them with 22 different species of tsetse fly.



There is a very interesting secret life of the insects all around us. We hope we have enticed you to take an interest in them and follow all our articles and researches as we continue to learn more.