
The Kissing Bug

by: Nan Byrne¹

YOU CAN CALL THIS SNEAKY BUG BY MANY NAMES

Pandora really did it when she sneaked a peek into the forbidden box! Unleashed among other nuisances and banes to mankind were some rather pesky insects and bugs.

Reduviidae is the scientific family name for true bugs. *Triatoma sanguisuga* is a species that, unfortunately, thrives nicely within the lowland Southwestern deserts up to 6,000-foot elevations.

Commonly, *Triatoma* hails to a variety of names: bellows bug, assassin bug, Hualapai (Walapi) Tiger, cone-nose beetle, cross bug, or kissing bug. As his names imply, this bug is neither friendly nor is his “kiss” nice. His appearance resembles the squash bugs, and one can feel free to squash *Triatoma* without a twinge of conscience.



Kissing Bug
Original artwork by Nan Byrne

To identify *Triatoma*, look for these characteristics: a protruding cone-shaped proboscis nose, followed by short antennae and protruding eyes; the flattish oval-shaped, six-legged body which is segmented with an obvious definition at the neck.

Overlapped, light-to-dark brown to blackish wings are noticeable; but the most obvious clue is the red-orange stripe along the outer edges of the back. Length

¹ Article last appeared in the Black Mountain News, 5 Apr 1984



varies among the species and with age. Juveniles are about ½-inch to approximately 1½ inches for an adult.

Early May is generally when the winged adults emerge to begin their dispersal flights. May and June are their most active months, but *Walapi* persists throughout the summer and into October.

This bug is nocturnal. In the daytime he remains hidden; if a house has been infiltrated, in and under rugs, bedding, curtains and crevices are among the favorite hiding places. His feeding habits are parasitic and exclusive to warm-blooded vertebrates.

A favorite victim is the wood or pack rat, and this rodent's nest is where the cone-nose breeds and multiplies. At night he is alert and is active by wing and foot. He seems to be attracted by lighted windows.

One must often be swift to “zap” him. He is sneaky, and does not approach or bite when the victim is actively awake; he prefers quiet or sleeping prey.

The “kiss” is not sudden, and at this point is almost painless. This bite is achieved by piercing the victim's skin with the four stylets in the proboscis, through which the blood is sucked from the capillaries.

Often the penetrations are multiple, as the bug strolls along the unsuspecting host's skin. Engorgement can take 10 minutes.

Immediately after being bitten, however, the victim can awaken and react to severe itching and discomfort. Depending upon the allergic sensitivity of an individual, one's reaction can vary from fairly mild itching, reddening and swelling to severe, painful, large swollen welts.

Other reactions, such as general body swelling, nettle-like rash, itching on the palms of the hands, soles of feet, neck and groin can occur. Highly sensitized individuals may experience illness, light depression, quickened pulse, general weakness and nausea.

Also, it is important to be aware that in any blood-sucking bite, the proboscis can be contaminated with pathogenic organisms. If these organisms become localized - infected - near the puncture or gain access to the blood stream, serious complications can result.



Prevention rather than treatment is the best strategy. Know exactly what this insect looks like and stalk him offensively. Discourage pack rats from constructing their dwellings in close proximity to yours. The task isn't easy (take care with the cholla joints), but with persistence a hoe or rake can scatter a nest sufficiently to encourage the occupants to flee to open desert.

Weatherstrip windows and doors, fill cracks, disturb the hiding places; and before retiring, search the bedding. Do not hesitate to be aggressive with a flyswatter, rolled newspaper, well-directed shoe sole, or whatever else is handy and effective.

Remember, the kissing bug does not demonstrate attack behavior to prey that is awake and active.

Should one be bitten, first aid can be effective to relieve the symptoms, but remedies and techniques vary and change.

Some reactions require immediate medical care. Direct your inquiries for home treatments to experienced professionals.

Since the cone-nose beetle does inhabit the foothills, additional knowledge is also a good defense strategy. Literature is available.

Poisonous Dwellers of the Desert, by Natt N. Dodge, is a booklet on the Desert Foothills Library's shelves that provides valuable reference on both insects and reptiles.

It is also good to know that the Banner Good Samaritan Poison Information Center will provide additional information and assistance, emergency or otherwise, on a 24-hour, seven-days-a-week basis by phone. The toll-free numbers are 800-362-0101 and 800-222-1222.

