

## Trying to Avoid the Bitey Things

### AGRI-VIEWS

by Chuck Otte, Geary County Extension Agent

It's no surprise to anyone that excessive rain in May and June, coupled with warm temperatures will invariably yield a plethora of insects. Some of those insects feed on our plants or all the decaying organic matter, and then try to find a way to get in our homes when we aren't looking. Unfortunately, other insects and critters are trying to feed on us! We are all familiar with mosquitoes, chiggers and ticks, but one we don't normally have a lot of problems with, black flies or buffalo gnats, have been quite abundant and bothersome this year.

I was conducting a breeding bird survey early last Sunday morning in western Dickinson County. The route went through several miles that had been and was still experiencing flooding. Mosquitoes weren't much of an issue, but the black flies, also called buffalo gnats or no-see-ums, were horrendous. I still have many bites that are annoying me and yes, I was wearing repellent!

Black flies are small flies, which is all a gnat really is, that prefer cooler temperature and slowly moving water. Where mosquitoes need stagnant water for egg laying and brood rearing, black flies want moving water. The high river flows and floods that we have been dealing with the past two months have been perfect conditions for them. Once water temperatures move above 75 degrees reproduction really shuts down. Male and female black flies feed on nectar but the female also needs a blood meal for egg development. While small, they will travel for several miles looking for food or an egg laying site.

In general the adults only live for a week or two and with hotter temperatures we should be towards the end of their reign in our area. They are generally a much bigger problem further north where temperatures are cooler. But I can tell you from personal experience, that they are vicious and persistent biters. The good news is that while their bites bring a great deal of discomfort, the level of which varies from person to person, they do not carry diseases like mosquitoes and ticks can. Which doesn't make their bites itch any less!

In general we recommend dealing with them the same way we do with mosquitoes, ticks and chiggers: protective clothing and repellents. What I really needed on Sunday morning was one of the head nets that you put on, sort of like a light weight beekeepers veil, which keeps the gnats away from you. These rascals will go in your ear, up your nose and behind your glasses!

I'm a firm believer in using permethrin based products for clothing treatments. These products work well for all of these insects, basically anything except oak itch mites, but can only be used on clothing. I spray shoes, socks, pants, cap, basically any clothing I've got on if I'm going off trail and into the vegetation. I typically use DEET on exposed skin, which is what I did Sunday morning. But it didn't seem to keep these rascals at bay. I think part of the reason for that is that DEET confuses insects as to whether you are worth biting, but it doesn't keep them from flying all around your head. Later in the morning I made a second application, this time with a repellent containing picaridin. Almost immediately I had relief. I don't know if picaridin has more repellency effect or what, but it did work. While picaridin is available from many companies I've been able to find it locally as Repel Tick Defense.

Biting critters are going to be around all summer long. You can choose to hide inside and not come out until October. Or you can make judicious use of protective clothing and the many available repellents and carry on with your normal summer activities!