

Spider Crabs

WE ARE used to crabs mostly as delicacies of the table, usually served up, for the sake of "atmosphere," cooked and stuffed back into their own shells. The edible crabs of the world belong to a relatively small group of species. The inedible kinds of crabs outnumber the species of positive economic value many fold in number, and include a host of species of interesting and often weird appearance.

Prominent among these are the spider-crabs. These are true crabs, all right, and no more related to spiders than are other crabs. They are given the name simply because so many of them are long-legged, and because some species are swift and spider-like in their movements.

These generalizations, however, do not hold throughout the whole community of spider-crabs. Some of them, presumably, started out long-legged and long-clawed like the rest, and in the course of time evolved into short, blocky, rocky-looking individuals.

As a group, the spider-crabs incline to a deep-water habitat. Some of the strangest of them are dredged up from the dark abysses where no ray of sunlight penetrates and where the only light ever seen is the phosphorescence of various fishes and other forms of marine animal life. These deep-water spider-crabs are likely to have exceedingly long but exceedingly thin legs, so that they look like harvestmen or daddy-long-legs. This is presumed to indicate a high development of the sedentary habit, especially when it is combined, as it sometimes is, with a relatively ponderous development of the claws.

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ENTOMOLOGY

Oil Pools Are Nurseries For Strange Species of Fly

AN INCREDIBLE fly that spends its infancy at the bottom of pools of oil, which is almost instantly fatal to most insects, is described in an article by Dr. W. H. Thorpe of the Imperial Institute of Entomology, London. It answers to the appropriate scientific name *Psilopa petrolii*.

The fly is found only in parts of the California oil field. Its larval life is spent entirely in shallow pools of waste oil, left after refinery processes have removed the more volatile fractions, such as gasoline and petroleum naphtha.

Like all insects and insect larvae, it must have air to breathe. It comes to the surface when it feels short of oxygen, and protrudes a sort of periscope arrangement, drawing in a supply and then submerging again.

The fly has been known for a good many years, but not much study has

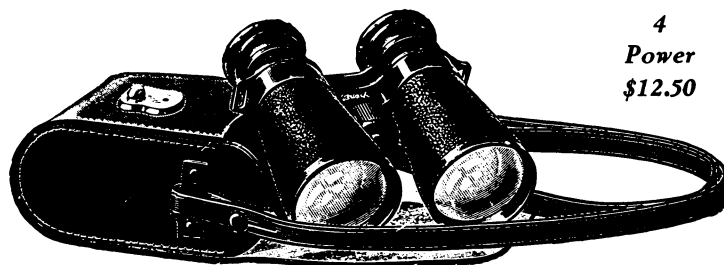
been made of its habits. Dr. L. O. Howard of the Bureau of Entomology, U. S. Department of Agriculture, was one of the first to report on it. In an article written thirty years ago, he assumed that it fed on the remains of other insects that had perished in the oil. Later entomologists were inclined to doubt this, and credited the larvae with the ability to digest the heavy crude-oil residue.

To settle this problem, Dr. Thorpe raised a number of the larvae in clear oil, where he could watch their behavior. He gave part of them food consisting of ground-up insects. The rest he left unfed. The fed larvae passed through their life-cycle successfully in a large percentage of cases, and came out as full-grown flies. The unfed ones died almost to the last fly, a very few surviving by eating the dead bodies of their companions.

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