

Creepy crawlies

by Alison Driver

What is a creepy crawly?

Well, it isn't easy to give a straight definition so I'll tell you a couple of stories to try to explain. A few years ago I was on holiday in Holland. I was on a bicycle trip and at the very first sign of a hill, I got off my bike for a rest. I sat down by the side of the road on the grass. A few seconds later, I was covered in ants. They were swarming all over me so I quickly got up and brushed them off. I had obviously sat near an anthill and they were protecting their territory from an invader. It was a strange experience but I soon forgot about it, got back on my bike and tackled the hill.

A couple of years later, I was living in Jordan. I had just moved into a modern flat and was unpacking plates and saucepans, when I saw something move out of the corner of my eye. I looked over at the kitchen drawer, where I had put the knives and forks, and there was a cockroach crawling out of it. I screamed. Then, my heart pounding, and probably still screaming, I grabbed a handy can of insecticide and sprayed half of it on the very hardy cockroach. He ran at me but I jumped out of the way and he scuttled out of the kitchen and under the nearby toilet door. It took me three days before I found the courage to open the toilet door (luckily there was another bathroom in the house!) to see if he was still alive. He wasn't.

Why did I react so violently to one lone insect when a closer encounter with hundreds of ants hardly affected me? The answer is easy: because cockroaches are creepy crawlies and ants aren't.

Creepy crawlies are those little bugs which provoke feelings such as apprehension, anxiety or aversion – they make your skin crawl. Flies aren't creepy crawlies but spiders are. Ladybirds are rather sweet but centipedes are scary. Guess which is a creepy crawly?

Did you know that some people can feel such a fear of bugs that it can even become a phobia? I recognise that my reaction was exaggerated. I knew the cockroach wasn't going to harm me, even though he did seem to be running straight for me even as I sprayed, but I couldn't help myself. Why did I react the way I did to a relatively innocuous creature?

Psychologists have offered many explanations. Some say it was an instinctive reaction to a perceived threat, the idea being that these insects were harmful to us many generations back and that this fear is harboured in our subconscious. Others explain it by saying that we associate them with dirt and disease. Or that these are life forms that are so alien to us, that we find them repulsive for their dissimilarity. A more cultural-specific reason proffered is that in Western philosophy the individual is held to be the most important creature of all God's creatures and other living creatures are subordinate to him. Insects, instead, don't follow our rules – they just do what they want and invade our space. It is interesting to note that in China, where man is viewed as only one element of the world and humans and nature are one and the same, aversion to insects is not as common.

Whatever the cause, entomologists despair at this squeamish attitude towards their object of study. They would like us to appreciate insects for the benefits they bring, which are many. Pest control and waste decomposition to name a couple. Unfortunately, although insects and bugs have been a very successful animal species up to now, many of them, like many other species nowadays, are under threat of extinction. Entomologists warn that this could upset entire ecosystems and lead to all kinds of disastrous consequences.

So my plea to you is: the next time you feel the urge to stamp on, splatter or spray a creepy crawly, give a thought to the planet and desist!