

HOT NEWS

WHEEL BUGS LOOK LIKE KNIGHTS IN ARMOR - BUT ARE THEY FRIEND OR FOE?

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One of the most bizarre bugs that may be encountered in Indiana is the 'wheel bug'. This is a very large and robust insect. It's gray color and slow jerking movements are reminiscent of a Medieval knight in a large suit of armor. The most notable character of this insect is the cog wheel-shaped structure arising above the head like a helmet. This is often described as the top of a gear wheel, complete with teeth, and is what gives this insect its common name.

Wheel bugs are in the assassin bug family. While several other species are included, this one is the most commonly submitted to the PPDL for identification. It has but one generation per year and the nymphs often have an orange or red colored abdomen. They grow from very tiny, newly hatched insects in the spring time to adults measuring 1.5 inches or so by mid summer and fall. The nymphs may not have the gear wheel fully developed but they always have a tubular shaped head with a long beak that unfolds forward. In nymphs or adults this beak is used much like a knight's lance that is plunged into their prey for food or into their enemies for self defense. Salivary fluids are injected that dissolve the prey's insides into a slurry. This slurry is then sucked out of the prey insect, leaving behind the discarded shell of the victim. Because their prey often consists of pest insects, wheel bugs are considered beneficial insects. Their biggest drawback is that they can inflict a painful bite to unwary people who handle them carelessly. The bite of a wheel bug is serious and may take months to heal (sometimes leaving a small scar), so caution is advised when handling them.

Wheel bugs are slow moving and often hide on plants or on buildings. They have membranous wings, allowing for clumsy, noisy flight. They are common in Indiana although many people in the region report having never previously seen them. Once found, however, they are not soon forgotten. These tiny knights in shining armor are considered friend or foe, depending upon whether they bite you or defend against your enemy.



Wheel bug nymph



Wheel bug adult feeding on its prey