

Book Review:

50 Common Insects of the Southwest by Carl Olson

Insects are an intimate part of human culture and society, but because of a singular lack of accessible information, most people rarely take note of the little critters that run the planet. Carl Olson in his book *50 Common Insects of the Southwest* (Western National Parks Association, Tucson, Arizona, 2004) shows us the connection between insects and humans in fifty easy insect lessons. Fifty insects—from the Creosote Walkingstick to the Tarantula Hawk—are highlighted in a simple to use, one-page format that includes a large color photo, common name and scientific name, size, distribution, and discussion of the insect's place in the environment and human society. Olson, a pre-eminent storyteller, relates to us the lessons that each insect teaches us about chemistry, music, human history, physiological adaptation, land management, natural history, and art. Olson uses insects to teach us a multitude of facts including: how the 14th century British army became known as the “red coats” (Cortés took the cochineal insect which produces a vibrant, red, dye back to the Europe); the black pigmentation of the Pinacate Beetle serves a natural sunscreen and protects the beetle from being burned by the intense desert sun; the macabre parasitic relationship between the horsehair worm and the Jerusalem Cricket, and; that by carefully listening to the cicada's song, you can distinguish different species by their different tunes. Along the way, we learn how insects are land managers (Seed Bugs manage plant populations by preventing seed germination) or how introduced species in the United States impact our native species (imported African dung beetles out-compete and displace our native dung beetles). It appears that Olson may have

intended insect names to teach us Latin (Myrmeleontidae is derived from the Latin words for ant and lion). To my dismay (and probably to young people who love long dinosaur names), this was not continued throughout the remainder of the book. Olson provides an important multi-cultural component of insects as part of the American southwest, from the Mexican mythology of the Black Witch moth (it is an omen for death if it comes to your door) to the Tohono O'odhman harvest of the White-Lined Sphinx moth for a winter protein source.

The *50 Common Insects of the Southwest* provides readily accessible information for teachers, naturalists, tourists, and people of all ages. This guide provides a snapshot of just a few insects—enough to entice kids and adults to seek out additional resources and information. More guides like this one are needed for scorpions and spiders, and butterflies and beetles. The guide is sure to be popular companion for naturalists. I can just imagine hearing a nature guide in the Sonoran Desert excitedly explaining the natural history of the Tarantula Hawk and paraphrasing Olson perfectly!

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