



SPRINGTAILS RETURN

Springtails have been observed by many throughout Columbia County this past week due to our unseasonably warm weather. Each winter and early spring during temporary thaws and warm spells, many homeowners around Columbia County experience the appearance of what they feel is an unusual phenomenon of nearly microscopic critters, by the thousands, if not millions, on snow banks or in puddles of water. They appeared in different parts of the county during the warm spell last week and I am sure they will show up again this spring. This critter is known as a springtail, in the Order of Collembola. However, they are also commonly referred to as “snow-flea” but they are not a flea at all and I’d rather not use that common name since it often suggests a more serious pest. So let’s stick with springtails.

Although springtails are around pretty much all the time, they are generally visible only a few times of the year, during the late winter and early spring months, in Columbia County. As mentioned above, they usually occur in very large numbers, sometimes so many at a time so as to color the snow. There is also a yellow springtail that is said to cover the snow like a “carpet of gold.”

Springtails, (*Achorutes nivicola*), are minuet, wingless insects that are widely distributed with over 2000 species being identified worldwide, including 315 species here in North America alone. Springtails can range in color from white, gray, yellow to red, orange, purple, brown, mottled, but usually black, according to The Audubon Society Field Guide to North American Insects and Spiders, Alfred A. Knopf, Inc., 1984.

According to our Cornell Cooperative Extension Snow Flea/Springtail fact sheet, “this abundant insect species of forest and yard, can occur anytime in winter, whenever a few days of mild weather occur, on the surface of snow, often over whole acres of woodland or lawn, looking at first sight, as though gunpowder had been scattered there. The fine meal-like powder with which their bodies are coated, enables them to float buoyantly upon the surface of water, without becoming wet. When the snow is melting so as to produce small rivulets coursing along the tracks of wheels or footprints, these critters are often observed, floating passively in its current, in such numbers as to form continuous strings. In addition, in the early spring, the buckets and troughs for the collection of maple sap are often thronged with these insects.”

Springtails actually come from the ground or more specifically; leaf mold, under bark, in decaying logs, in fungi, and from other organic matter sources. Most species are believed to feed on organic debris. They are of no real concern to homeowners since they cause no damage and are not harmful to man, animal, or plant material, although, they can be a nuisance as I have heard about swarms of these minuet insects coming indoors around sliding glass doors where they can create slippery conditions on tile or wood floors. Mopping them up with a household cleaner will resolve the problem.

Springtails do have the ability to jump which often attracts more attention and is responsible for the common name of “flea.” It is interesting to point out that the springtail is one of the few insects that occur in the adult stage during the wintertime in our area. They are really more of a curiosity than anything else and of interest to the naturalist and gardener, as well as the scientist.

Be on the lookout for springtails the next time we have a thaw here in Columbia County. Happy Gardening!

Gardening questions can be address to the Master Gardener volunteers of Cornell Cooperative Extension of Columbia County, 479 Route 66, Hudson, NY 12534 by phone at (518) 828-3346 or via email at columbia@cornell.edu. Visit our web site at www.cce.cornell.edu/columbia/ under “Need Help with Gardening Questions” for submitting a question via email.###