

Unwanted guests: Insects

Even if a creature is small, it should still be treated compassionately. Animal sentience and the ability to feel pain is no longer seen as applying only to mammals, and as understanding grows this is likely to be extended further, including to insects. As we interact with insects we should treat them humanely and strive to avoid harm.

Keeping companion animals healthy is also vitally important, so don't stop flea, tick or worm treatment. But there are many things we can do to deter some of our smaller unwanted guests without killing them or polluting the environment on which we all, animals and humans, depend.

Avoid using pesticides. Their effects can reach well beyond target species, harming wildlife¹ such as birds, bats, hedgehogs, frogs, toads, bees and other non-target insects. In the home they can pose a danger to pets.

Try to live alongside our small guests. Develop a greater tolerance for small unwanted guests. Most will do little, if any, damage, and zapping them with chemicals could do greater harm. It's worth resisting the urge to immediately evict or banish them. Obviously, if you have a large number you will want to act. So, here we suggest some humane measures you can take...

Choose repellents, not killer sprays. Many sprays and substances are formulated to kill particular insects and other problem species. However, others focus on repelling or deterring instead. Repellents or deterrents should be applied to surfaces or entry points, never directly onto creatures. Check product information carefully to avoid killer sprays, and ensure they are vegan-friendly and not animal-tested.

Essential oils can be effective – but use with care. Pure essential oils are extremely concentrated and can damage skin. Ensure essential oils are diluted before use, or purchase essential oil-based products already formulated. Always look for sustainably sourced oils. They might not be suitable if you have companion animals.

Ensure substances are safe for companion animals. Some repellents and some essential oils and herbs, can be toxic to cats and dogs and other animals.² Check products for 'pet safety' assurances.

A humane insect catcher can help if you need to remove an insect. This device temporarily traps an insect for release outdoors, although not all devices are designed to be humane/non-lethal. Schwegler's Snapy Insect Catcher, probably the best product, is designed to 'protect and conserve instead of killing and destroying'.³ We don't recommend insect vacuums, which may harm insects even where this isn't the intention.

If you have an emergency or an infestation, contact an expert. See, for example, Humane Wildlife Solutions.⁴

Houseflies and fruit flies

Don't use fly traps or fly papers! There are many ways to deter flies without resorting to lethal, inhumane methods.

If your home has unwanted flies, your first course of action should be to make it less attractive to them. **Ensure your home is kept clean, especially your kitchen.** Make sure food and food waste is contained and sealed. This is particularly important when dealing with fruit flies.



Photo by Jin Yeong Kim

Fruit Flies

Fruit flies are attracted to fermenting, mature fruit, including bruised bananas. To reduce these temptations **keep an eye on your fruit bowl** and **maintain a clean, tidy kitchen**. Ensure shelves and surfaces are clean, especially of fruit juice. Don't leave dirty washing up, minimise damp patches, and keep rubbish/recycling bins clean with lids securely on. Careful indoor plant maintenance also helps.



Grow aromatic pot plants. Try growing basil, lavender, mint, tansy or wormwood as indoor plants. All are known to be natural fly repellents.

Citrus is also a fly deterrent. Try cloves studded into cut lemon halves, left on a dish.

Use lavender or other essential oils. Lavender is frequently cited as an effective deterrent, as well as other essential oils including citronella, eucalyptus, pennyroyal, peppermint, and lemongrass. Pure essential oils always need diluting before use. Once diluted, they can be used as a spray solution. They can also be used in a diffuser.



Clothes Moths

Clothes moths (*Tineola bisselliella*) are sometimes also called the common clothes moth or webbing clothes moth. Adults don't feed on fabric, but they seek out dark, undisturbed places to lay their eggs. It is the moth larvae that may eat clothes.

What you can do

Cedar oil deters moths from laying eggs, and there are long-established traditions of cedar being used to protect fabrics. Turkish carpet shops are walled with cedarwood boards to deter moths and cedar chests have been in use as far back as ancient Greece.

Use cedar oil or cedarwood blocks, balls, hangers or drawer liners. Place in wardrobes and drawers where you keep clothes and fabrics. Cedarwood loses fragrance every few months, so should be replaced, re-infused with oil, or sanded down to release more aroma. The most effective oil is Atlantic cedar (*Cedrus Atlantica*, sometimes called Atlas oil) although other cedar oils should provide some deterrence. Atlantic cedar is endangered⁵, so seek out sustainably sourced supplies.

Use a vegan-formula moth repellent spray, such as Ecozone. These act as a barrier, preventing moths settling on fabrics.

Don't use mothballs or moth traps. Mothballs contain moth-killing insecticides which are bad for the environment and will have been tested on animals. Moth traps are (usually) sticky pheromone traps which kill male moths. However they don't stop females or deal with larvae.

Ants

Ants are amazing creatures. They have sophisticated navigational ability and play important functions within ecosystems. If you have ants indoors, it may be because they have located accessible food.

What you can do

Make your home less attractive to ants! This is most important action you can take. Keep your home clean, especially your kitchen. Avoid leaving crumbs and other exposed food on surfaces or out of containers. Don't leave dog or cat food out. Keep rubbish and recycling bins sealed.



Photo by Andre Moura

Follow ants' movements to detect their entry points and block them. If ants are coming in through crevices, ensure these are filled. Fit weatherstripping to windows and doors to make them well-sealed.

Use barrier deterrents, but with care

Some substances that deter ants may also harm or kill them. Cinnamon essential oil has been shown to be an effective ant repellent but also kills ants in a closed environment. D-limonene is the active ingredient in some insect sprays, and particularly those targeting ants. It is usually derived from orange peel oil or other citrus oils. If sprayed directly onto ants it destroys the waxy coating of their respiratory systems, causing suffocation. If you resort to using cinnamon (powder or diluted oil), orange oil or other d-limonene based substances, only use as a barrier deterrent by applying to entry points. Garlic, mint, cloves, paprika and dilute solutions of vinegar or lemon juice⁶ are also sometimes suggested as deterrents. These should also only be used as barriers.

Wasps



Over 9,000 species of wasp live in the UK, although only a few come into regular contact with people. It is a little known fact that wasps are important pollinators, transferring pollen from plant to plant whilst hunting for nectar. They play a crucial role maintaining balance in ecosystems, killing insects, including aphids, and spiders to feed their young.

What you can do

Wasps feed on sweet liquids and sweet moist food, and are likely to be attracted to open bins.

Keep rubbish bins at a distance from your home if possible, and ensure lids are secure.

Keep windows and doors closed when you can. Use fly screens in hotter months when you need windows open. These will keep other insects out too.

Minimise indoor temptations! Keep kitchen surfaces clean and don't leave sweet liquids uncovered or unattended. Ensure your kitchen food waste caddy and indoor bins are covered as securely as possible and your recycling is well rinsed.

Use a 'wasp scarecrow' type deterrent in your garden, such as a Waspinator⁷. This structure mimics a wasp nest, and can be placed in a suitable location in your garden. Wasps think an existing wasp nest is present and will want to keep their distance. This does no harm, but should deter wasps from areas of human activity.

Insects advice sheet

Use muslin, old tights or fabric mesh to protect fruit trees or grapes. Wasps will only eat growing fruit that has already been damaged by other insects or birds. Fabric mesh barriers should protect your fruit crop from wasps.

What about wasps' nests?

If you have an active wasps nest, it is best to leave it alone. However, wasps make a new nest each year, so you can safely remove a nest in the winter, when it will have been abandoned. New nests are created in the spring, when they will only be about the size of a golf ball. Moving or destroying an active nest will probably kill most of the wasps, and doing so can aggravate the wasps who will aggressively try to defend it. If you are thinking of removing an active wasps nest, we suggest you contact Humane Wildlife Solutions in the first instance.

Midges and other biting insects

Biting insects can be a real problem. But thankfully there are some effective solutions.

What you can do

Use vegan-friendly personal sprays or lotions.

Vegan-friendly products exist for spraying on your skin to protect against biting insects, including mosquitos and midges. The chemical active ingredient of most sprays is either DEET⁸ or Picaridin (Icaridin)⁹. Some people avoid DEET due to skin irritation, safety or environmental concerns.¹⁰ Vegan products based on lemon eucalyptus (PMD), such as Incognito¹¹, offer a good alternative. The NHS has acknowledged the effectiveness of lemon eucalyptus-based repellents. Citronella oil-based sprays cannot legally be called repellents in Europe, although they should give short-lived protection. Apply repellents to exposed skin before going out and re-apply every few hours.



The highland midge (*culicoides impunctatus*) is a particular feature of Scottish lochs in the summer, although it can be encountered in other parts of the UK too. Female midges congregate in large groups and can deliver a sharp bite. As well as using a personal repellent, **dressing suitably can make a big difference:**

- **Wear light coloured clothes.** Midges are attracted to darker clothes, so this will help.

- **Wear a protective midge jacket or midge hat.** If you're going to be spending significant time in midge-prone areas, its worth investing in specialist clothing.

1. Pesticide Action Network (PAN) UK www.pan-uk.org
2. PDSA has useful advice, including on plants toxic to pets (<https://www.pdsa.org.uk/taking-care-of-your-pet/looking-after-your-pet/all-pets/poisonous-plants>) and essential oils to avoid or use with care around cats (<https://www.pdsa.org.uk/taking-care-of-your-pet/looking-after-your-pet/kittens-cats/cats-and-essential-oils>).
3. https://www.schwegler-natur.de/portfolio_1408430231/insekten-snappy/?lang=en
4. <https://humanewildlifesolutions.co.uk/>
5. *Cedrus atlantica*. The IUCN Red List of Threatened Species
6. In lemons, most d-limonene is found in the peel (and in extracted lemon oil). Less is present in lemon juice.
7. See waspinator.co.uk/faqs/. Other similar products may also be available.
8. The chemical name is N,N-diethyl-meta-toluamide or diethyltoluamide.
9. Sometimes traded as Saltidin or Bayrepel.
10. The US Environmental Protection Agency describes DEET as 'slightly toxic to birds, fish, and aquatic invertebrates'. Recent research has shown impacts upon aquatic habitats. Some people have toxic or allergic reactions to repellents containing DEET.
11. www.lessmosquito.com



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