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HOW TO SUBMIT INSECT SPECIMENS
FOR IDENTIFICATION

By C. F. H. JENKINS, M.A., Government Entomologist

FROM time to time most farmers and orchardists come across insects or other small creatures which they have not seen before and about which they would like some information. I get numerous queries about such creatures and am always glad to help, but sometimes the task is made unnecessarily difficult. The most detailed description of a caterpillar or a beetle given by letter is often quite useless as many of the most important features from the scientific point of view may be omitted.

The same criticism applies to pencil sketches, whatever the artistic merit may be of the particular contribution. When it is realised that about one million different kinds of insects have already been officially named and that about half a million more are waiting to be classified, it is obvious that all too many of them must be superficially at least very similar.

Whenever inquiries are being made about even the commonest of insects, specimens should always be forwarded. The difficulties which can arise when there is no specimen to clarify the question will be seen from the following example. Some time ago, a short note was received saying, "Please give me some information about the control of red spider." There were no specimens and no details about the crop being attacked. There is a common summer pest of vegetables known popularly as the red spider, but as this query came in the winter time I was rather suspicious that the red-legged earth mite was the actual pest in question.

There are four types of mites which are sometimes loosely referred to as either red spiders or red mites and, of course, without some further clue it is difficult to give information about control measures.

The red-legged earth mite is well known to all as a winter pest of clover and other legumes. The true red spider, as already mentioned, is a common summer pest of various cultivated plants. Then there is the bryobia mite or red mite of the apple grower and, lastly, there is the red mite of poultry. So it is obvious that a short note asking for information about either the red mite or the red spider without either specimens or some explanatory details, can prove very baffling, not only to the recipient but the inquirer if he gets the wrong answer.

In the case of fully mature insects, some dead specimens in a small box will usually prove adequate. For preference, they should be wrapped or padded with tissue paper to stop them from rattling about and losing their limbs. On no account should they be wrapped in cotton wool as the legs and feelers become so entangled that casualties are almost inevitable when the specimens are being unpacked.

Where caterpillars are concerned, these should be forwarded alive, if possible, with a quantity of the food plant. It is often very difficult to accurately identify caterpillars but if they can be reared to maturity the task is much easier.

On no account should insects alive or dead (especially if they are rather fleshy) be forwarded in closely sealed tins or bottles. Even in cold weather they are often too decomposed to identify and in the summer the aromas which quite small insects can produce after being sealed up for a while must be experienced to be fully appreciated. A cardboard box is usually a satisfactory container, especially when caterpillars and food plants are involved.

Some specimens, especially very small ones, can be safely forwarded in methylated spirits or formalin but bottles should be carefully packed to avoid breakage.
In this short talk I have not given any details concerning the preservation of insects where a permanent collection is required.

The number of farmers interested in this aspect of entomology is probably rather small, and those with sufficient moral courage to face the world with an open butterfly net are probably even fewer.

To summarise them, it should be remembered that when information is wanted about any creature, several specimens should be sent if at all possible. Full particulars should also be given as to the prevalence of the insect, where it was found, and the type of damage it was doing. The name and address of the sender should accompany the specimens even if a covering letter has been forwarded independently.

And, lastly, may I emphasise that whenever you see a strange insect about which you have any suspicions, don’t hesitate to send in an inquiry. Many of our major pests were introduced from abroad and became firmly established before their presence was realised. The sooner a newcomer is recognised, the sooner action can be taken against it. We have failed to keep out many pests but prompt action has saved the State from many others, and the co-operation of the farmer and the orchardist are of prime importance in this regard.

FOOTROT IN SHEEP

Encouraging Reports from Bridgetown

An encouraging feature of the campaign against footrot in sheep had been the success achieved in eradicating the disease from a number of flocks in the Bridgetown area, said Chief Veterinary Surgeon of the Department of Agriculture, Mr. C. R. Toop, recently.

The Bridgetown district with its high rainfall and lush pastures offers almost ideal conditions under which the footrot germs could flourish, said Mr. Toop, and control was apt to be difficult because of the diversified nature of farming in those areas.

Where farmers were engaged simultaneously in fruit and vegetable growing, dairying, beef production and other activities in addition to sheep-raising, the task of controlling sheep diseases was made more difficult because of the limited time available for flock care.

Nevertheless, of 180 properties quarantined for footrot since 1949, 142 have now been released as footrot-free and 32 of the 38 still in quarantine are applying approved control measures and appear likely to eradicate the disease in due course.

The large number of successful clearances achieved in the current season, which had favoured the spread of footrot, was most encouraging and reflected great credit upon the District Stock Inspector, Mr. J. R. Blackburn, and his two assistants who had been specially appointed to the district under the Commonwealth Extension Services Grant.

Their hard work and a generous measure of co-operation from the local farmers had made possible a highly encouraging degree of control under difficult seasonal and climatic conditions.
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