

U.S.**Hordes of Hungry Grasshoppers Invade Utah**

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TOOELE, Utah -- An ambitious director might look at Mitch Halligan's property and see an instant B-movie classic: "Invasion of the Grasshoppers."

The place is overrun with the greasy little bugs. With each step you take on his property, the squirmy inch-long grasshoppers jump for cover in every direction. Those that don't crunch under foot perch themselves atop tall grass stalks, crawl up pant legs or munch through gardens.

Across the road isn't much better. Grasshoppers blanketed the neighbors' entryway a few days ago and forced them to come in through the back door.

"I'd call this the closest that I've seen to a plague in a long time," Halligan said.

Grasshoppers are regular summer visitors and a perennial crop-eating pest for farmers, but this year's invasion in Tooele County west of Salt Lake City is worse than anyone can remember. Tooele County commissioners have been swamped with calls about grasshoppers, particularly by people living next to undeveloped land where grasshoppers hatch _ sometimes up to 2,000 per square foot.

"There's like 100 times more grasshoppers than what we're used to," said Bruce Clegg, a county commissioner whose family has lived in the area for generations.

Many of the culprits this year are clear-winged grasshoppers, which began hatching several weeks ago and have moved like an unyielding wave across the parts of the landscape ever since.

Northeast of Tooele, the grasshoppers showed up suddenly and attacked Leana Jackson's backyard garden, infiltrated her lawn and even found their way into her house and car.

"They're just a nuisance," Jackson said.

Alone, the brown and tan grasshoppers are small and more likely to tickle than terrify. But in large numbers _ and they almost always come in large numbers _ they are a hungry force to be reckoned with as they search for grasses and other plants to eat.

"Just their sheer abundance can make them a pretty destructive insect," said Clint Burfitt, an entomologist with the Utah Department of Agriculture and Food.

His office estimates that grasshoppers have hit about 250,000 acres in Utah this year. That's slightly more than the estimate at the end of 2008.

Grasshoppers come and go in seven- to 10-year cycles, said Larry Lewis, a spokesman for the Utah agriculture department. The overall numbers in Utah may not be that high _ more than 1.4 million acres were infested in 2001 _ but grasshoppers are drawing more attention this year as they move from farms to expanding suburban neighborhoods.

That's where many of the calls for help are coming from, said Linden Greenhalgh, the Utah State University extension agent in Tooele County whose running tally of calls about grasshoppers this summer nears 300.

People with houses that abut wild open areas where grasshoppers hatch are "sitting ducks" for the little invaders, he said.

"They'll come in and devour their landscapes," he said.

Part of the reason for this year's infestation is the upswing of their normal cycle. But dry weather for several years, and a wet June this year that provides plentiful food for this year's hatch, also play a role.

Plentiful populations have residents flicking them off their clothing, spraying several times a week and killing scores as they drive down the road.

"I think you could say it's the worst-ever in Tooele County. I don't think it'd be a stretch to say that," Greenhalgh said. Tooele County sits in a valley about 30 miles west of Salt Lake City.

He and others have been scrambling to respond. Already, they've sprayed about 18,000 acres with a poison that targets grasshoppers' ability to grow in their own exoskeleton.

Arriving with the grasshoppers have been flocks of hungry seagulls keen on bite-sized grasshopper snacks. That's a strange if welcome sight _ seagulls are Utah's state bird, beloved for reportedly feasting on infesting crickets that were threatening Mormon settlers' food supplies in 1848. Even people's chickens, which normally gobble up as many grasshoppers as they can catch each spring and summer, can't keep up.

But even birds and poisons probably won't be enough.

The grasshoppers, most of which aren't yet to the adult stage, will only grow bigger, and possibly more abundant, as the summer wears on, Halligan said.

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