

Insect Names Clear as Mud

Ever heard of a pearslug or a roseslug? How about an oakworm or a cabbageworm? These certainly are not slugs or worms at all but are insects with names that imply some resemblance to other animals.

Insect names often create confusion about the true identity of the insect and can prevent effective communication about insect-related issues. These misunderstandings are not trivial if they result in improper pesticide selection or unnecessary pesticide use.

In the examples above, pearslugs and roseslugs are actually immature sawflies. To make matters worse, sawflies are not flies at all, but are a kind of wasp. Oakworms and cabbageworms are both caterpillars. Other caterpillar names with the term “worm” include hornworm, mapleworm, budworm, fruitworm, and the list goes on.

Black Flies and Whiteflies

A general rule for insect names lies in whether the name is separated into two words or kept together as one. If an insect name contains the word “fly” as a distinct word, it can be considered a true fly. For example, we all know that a butterfly is not a true fly, nor is a dragonfly, firefly, or a whitefly. Instead, true flies are named with the words separated, such as fruit fly, house fly, or horse fly. More examples of one- and two-worded insect names are listed below.

One-worded insect names	vs.	Two-worded insect names
Ladybug (beetle)		Lace bug (true bug)
Lightningbug (beetle)		Stink bug (true bug)
Mayfly		Deer fly (true fly)
Silverfish		Black fly (true fly)
Antlion		Honey bee (true bee)
Webworm (caterpillar)		
Lovebug (true fly)		

Unfortunately, this rule doesn’t always help because many sources use insect names incorrectly (A google search of “cabbage worm” shows that a considerable percentage of the general population is not aware of this rule). This rule also does not necessarily apply to other animal names (catfish really are fish).

Insect or Bug?

You’ll notice that I included “true bugs” in the list above. Ever wonder why some entomologists grit their teeth when they hear an insect called a “bug”? Well, this term is technically reserved for a specific group of insects called

“true bugs”. Examples include plant bug, stink bug, lace bug, damsel bug, assassin bug, etc. I have marked the photo to the right with some characteristics that can help distinguish true bugs from other insects.



Honeylocust plant bug and characteristics of a true bug

Photo: Rosetta, OSU

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Lacewings and Lace Bugs

When hearing about highly beneficial lacewings, individuals often confuse them with highly destructive lace bugs.

These are two very different insects with very similar names. I often have to stop and think before I call either by name. If you have the same trouble, hopefully the above discussion about true bugs helps you remember the distinction between lacewings and lace bugs.

If you have any questions about the classification of an insect, feel free to ask me, or you can contact your County Extension Agent.

Lace bug adults

Size: 1/8” in length

Photo: Rosetta, OSU

Lacewing larva

Size: up to 1/2” in length

Photo: Starr Images

Lacewing adult

Size: up to 1” in length

Photo: Debbie Roos

Lacewing eggs

Photo: Debbie Roos

Lacewing larva

Size: up to 1/2” in length

Photo: Blake Newton

Lacewing adult

Size: up to 1” in length

Photo: Debbie Roos