

Strange Critters? I've Seen A Few...



An owlfly, *Ascaloptynx appendiculatus*, perched head—and upside—down, is one of the oddest critters I've seen in quite awhile.

When is enough too much? Boy, is it wet! Since the last column we've received almost another 7 inches of rain (including the one and a half inches we got yester-

day), raising our yearly total (so far) to a bit more than 34 inches, more than 85% of our annual average precipitation. And we're just barely half way through the year!

Needless to say, too—and I expect most of you naturalists out there are feeling this—all of the rain has kept photography and exploring curtailed more than usual. Still, I've managed to get out between downpours and see what there is to see. The highlight of this past week was my very first chance to photograph an owlfly and, I must say, a stranger critter I've never seen.

I have seen these odd-looking insects a time or two before but never had a chance to get close enough to photograph them or be able to pin a name on them. Thankfully, my new toy—a Sony DSC-H9 digital camera with its image-stabilized 465mm lens—arrived just in time!

Imagine if you will, an insect that flies as strongly as a small dragonfly, though in flight it looks more like a largish damselfly. Once the critter lands, it folds its wings upon its back like a damselfly, not holding them out to the sides like the typical dragonfly. Then you notice the l-o-n-g clubbed antenna that would look more at home on a butterfly than anything resem-

bling a dragon or damselfly.

Too cool, eh? Is it the “missing link” between Odonates and Butterflies? In fact, it's a Neuropteran, a member of the lacewing/antlion family that also includes the dobson and alderflies. The scorpionflies have been considered the nearest relatives of butterflies but what's interesting is that most recent classification schemes put the scorpionflies just before the dragon and damselflies and the Neuropterans as next to the butterflies and moths.

Owlflies are not common and there are only six species in North America. The ones I've been seeing are most likely *Ascaloptynx appendiculatus* (sounds a lot like something Harry Potter would proclaim, doesn't it? Though I shudder to think what the utterance *appendiculatus* would actually do when backed by a magic wand!), a species that Taber and Fleenor included in their “Insects of the Texas Lost Pines” (Texas A&M University Press, 2003).

Look for these apparent “bastard love-children” of a butterfly and a dragon/damselfly just before dusk, as they chase down robberflies and other prey. They are yet another weird and wonderful denizen of these Lost Pines...strange, but true!