

Ask A Vet: Horse Fly Horror

Sunday, September 7, 2014

Dear Dr. Weldy's,

Help! Horse flies are making my trail rides miserable!

Dear Reader,

I know - last week I was reminded that those pesky, persistent, blood sucking, chainsaws with wings are here with a vengeance until Jack Frost comes to the rescue. I had just finished a surgery on a horse with an eye problem under a nice shade tree on a lawn near the barn when we were attacked. Two giant horse flies the size of small hummingbirds landed on the sleepy horse's back just as she stood up from the anesthetic. I had a hold of her tail to steady her as she became more alert in her recovery from the general anesthetic. The sleepy mare at first was too dopey to care about those long knife like mandibles sawing a hole in her back and tanking up on the pool of blood. I swatted the first one with my hand rather gently so I wouldn't scare the awakening beast. The horsefly dropped to the ground, quickly recovered and returned to it's blood puddle to feed. The second horsefly landed on the mare's rump right in front of me and proceeded to saw away with those jagged mouthparts. I couldn't help myself - I slapped the horsefly hard enough to do some good with a loud pop - quickly followed by another loud pop made by the startled mare's hoof on my shin. When I finished hopping around and yelping a bit I was able to stomp the horsefly. By then the first fly had finished her meal (yes, only the females take blood meals) and flew away tanked up enough to last her 3-4 days.

Horseflies take about 1 ml. of blood per meal and 20 flies can consume a quart of blood in 10 days. Deer flies are the small counterpart of the horsefly and are also persistent biters. Horse flies can be up to 1 ¼ inches long (30mm) and the deer flies are about 1/3 inch (8mm) long. They both can be a real problem for cattle, horses, various other mammals, and humans with their aggressive, painful bites. They interfere with grazing of horses and reduce milk production in dairy cows. Beef cattle will have reduced weight gain and their hides are damaged by the holes the horseflies chew. Horses under attack are irritable and difficult to control.

Horseflies and deerflies spread diseases caused by viruses, bacteria, and parasites. Anaplasmosis in cattle and Equine Infectious Anemia (EIA - what the Coggins test is for) in horses are two significant disease problems that are spread by these pests.

Horsefly and deer fly females must ingest a protein blood meal before they can lay eggs. They lay up to 1000 eggs around water. Eggs hatch into larvae which feed on decaying matter and small organisms for up to 3 years before they pupate and hatch into adults.

It is very difficult to control these pests. Repellents and pesticides don't work very well due to their feeding habits and even very strong repellents that keep them from landing won't stop them from buzzing around and threatening the animal. Horse flies like sunny areas so deep shade and barns offer some refuge. Night grazing may be necessary as they are not active at night. They are strong fliers so elimination of breeding sites is not effective. Sticky traps can help capture these flies and baited insect box traps can also work. Biological control using insect parasites that feed on horsefly larvae and eggs are being successfully used in some areas.

Good luck! Those nice fall trail riding days are coming soon! Horse flies like hot weather so as the weather cools off they become less of a problem.

-Dr. Jerry Sellon