

THE INSECT PAGE

Just about a year ago Miss Elaine Culbert, Biggar, but then teaching at Gerald, reported that her pupils had come across an active "woolly bear" caterpillar before the snow was completely gone. This hardy insect was almost certainly a caterpillar of the Isabella Tiger Moth, which hibernates through the winter protected by its warm coat. Then, very early in spring it wakes up, looks around for a snack of this or that, and soon pupates in a small, felt-like cocoon woven of silk and the furry hairs which are shed at this time; the comparatively large moth emerging in late May. The caterpillars are banded in black and reddish-brown, and there is an old saying that a preponderance of black foretells a wet summer, and vice versa - so check up on colour of any "woolly bears" you may meet this spring!

OXYBELUS, A Catcher of Flies.

One hot Sunday morning in July a couple of years ago, I was stirring up the soil in my tulip bed when I spotted a tiny wasp digging industriously in the sandy soil. After excavating for a few minutes she came out of the hole and quickly covered up the opening so that there was nothing to mark the spot. Then she flew off. In a few minutes she came back, carrying a fly as large, or larger, than herself. She carried it clasped between her hind pair of legs and the whole body of the fly extended out behind her, upside down, presenting a most remarkable appearance. She lighted, scratched for a second, but found she had made a mistake, and moved swiftly to the right spot. After opening the entrance she disappeared for a few moments and was out again. In half an hour she carried in eight flies, and every time she went away she covered up the opening.

I had watched other solitary wasps, but this was an outstandingly industrious little creature. Much against my will I collected her for identification purposes and had no trouble in placing her in the genus Oxybelus, but so far I have been unable to get complete determination as to species.

Later I discovered several others of these Oxybelids working in my tulip bed, so I marked one nest with a match and allowed the wasp to complete her job, after which I carefully dug the nest up and found that it contained eleven flies. The lowermost fly had an egg attached to it between the head and the thorax. The egg was long and cylindrical. In every instance when I have disinterred the nests of this species the egg has been attached to the fly in the same place.

This particular Oxybelus is a bare quarter of an inch ($5\frac{1}{2}$ - 6 mm.) in length and is a dark grey colour with fine broken lines across the abdomen. The nests are nearly three inches deep, with an enlarged chamber at the bottom of the tunnel which slopes to the chamber at an angle of 45° .

Notes on the genus Oxybelus are not plentiful. Fabre makes the remarkable statement that Oxybelus carries flies home impaled on her sting. Undoubtedly this idea arose from the fact that the body of the fly was in plain sight. Some European species are said to kill their victims by biting their thorax just below the wings (at the point of one of the main nerve centres). So far I have never found any flies from the nests of these wasps with a crushed thorax and believe that most American species of Oxybelus paralyze and kill their prey by stinging

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