

# This Bug's for You

The Sonoran Desert is known for its amazingly diverse (and plentiful) insect population. Not all of these creatures are harmful — most are helpful and important to the balance of our sensitive ecosystem. We describe a dozen commonly encountered backyard insects.

BY CARA GIBSON | PHOTOGRAPHY BY KATJA SCHULTZ



### Horse Lubber Grasshopper

The bright coloration of these insects is to warn would-be predators that they are toxic. The black coloration allows them to better regulate their temperature as they are active from summer rains until the winter freeze. They are a delight to watch in flight as their underwings are hot fuchsia! They eat plants and do not bite or sting.



### Leafcutter Bee

Critical pollinators for wild plants, these small, peaceable bees are solitary, like 90% of all bee species. They cut moon-shaped leaf fragments to create cells for their offspring. Some folks spray plants to try to control the damage. This is ineffective as the bees do not eat the leaf pieces! These bees do not bite, and only rarely deliver a minor sting.



### Desert Cicada

This is the only insect species known to sweat! Males sing their loud buzzing songs to attract mates on even the hottest of summer days. Juveniles spend several years underground feeding on plant roots. When ready, they crawl up a vertical surface and transform into fully winged adults. They are harmless and do not bite or sting.



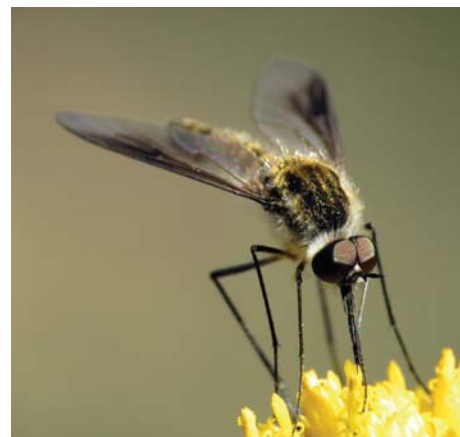
### Fig Beetle

Ardent consumption of sap and rotting fruit is what gives these beetles their name. Juvenile grubs consume decaying plant material and you may find them in your compost. Although dull on the top, adults are quite shiny on the bottom, so flip them over for a quick peek if you find one during late spring or early summer. They do not bite or sting.



### Robber Fly

These insects are excellent garden predators, with sharp vision and the ability to catch prey on the wing. They stop and consume their meals on the ground by plunging their tubular mouthparts into their victims. They do not sting nor generally bite people (though they can if provoked).



### Bee Fly

Being furry and bee-like affords these flies protection as others suspect that they can sting. Look carefully and you'll see that bee flies have only one pair of wings rather than two pairs as bees have. They are superb fliers and can hover in mid-air. They also are excellent pollinators. They do not bite or sting.



### Cochineal Scale Insects

The white fluff commonly seen on prickly pears is the waxy, defensive secretion of cochineal scale insects. The small bugs from within the white tangle were traditionally ground up by indigenous peoples and used to dye textiles red. Nowadays cochineal dye is found in food-stuffs labeled as carmine or red #4. These insects do not bite or sting.



### Mesquite Girdler

Honey mesquites are a favorite, but these beetles will chew rings around — or “girdle” — branches of most any mesquite species. Female beetles do this to create sapless niches for their eggs. The larvae then hatch, feed upon sapwood and pupate over winter. Adults do not sting, but may pinch with their mandibles or squeak when handled.



### Cactus Leaf-Footed Bug

Light colored patches on the joints of prickly pear pads are an early indication that these bugs are feeding on them. Eggs are laid in the spring, brightly colored nymphs hatch, and grow over the following months. They can be seen sharing the pads with the brownish adults that can live up to a year. They do not bite or sting.



### Flame Skimmer Dragonfly

Conspicuous residents of the Southwest, males often are seen in dramatic aerial battles vying for access to mates. As juveniles, they live underwater eating mosquito larvae and other insects for about a year. Adults catch soft-bodied insects in flight and consume their meals from perches. They do not sting, but can pinch if handled.



### Cactus Longhorn Beetle

A Sonoran Desert native, this gentle, flightless beetle often is seen around monsoon time, crawling slowly along the tops of prickly pears or chollas munching steadily. Larvae feed on the roots and stems of these cacti. They do not bite or sting, but can give a slow pinch with their mandibles.



### Paper Wasp

Although a bit fierce-looking, these wasps are beneficial garden predators as they hunt for prey (usually caterpillars, flies and beetle larvae) to feed offspring developing in their delicate, paper nests. They can be seen feeding at flowers and are active during the day, spring through fall. They do not bite, but can sting.