

Nature Week at Heritage Village - July 5th

Spittlebugs and their fecal foam

Lorie Axtell

You have probably noticed the foam on plants this time of year. It is produced by the nymph stage of insects called spittlebugs. There 23,000 different species and Lorie has produced these photos of two that are common in Heritage Village. In the spring they hatch from eggs and grow and mature by sucking up the sap of their host plant through their needle-like mouthparts. It is their poop that they whip into spittle.

"Spittlebug nymphs probably don't have much of a social life – they cover themselves in a froth made of their excrement. But it's a life-saving strategy that would otherwise leave them susceptible to the nymph-chewing jaws of predatory ants. After consuming sap from their favorite plant, the eastern white pine, spittlebug nymphs completely engulf themselves in foam containing at least five ant-repellant chemicals. As the predatory ants approach, taste buds in their probing antennae apparently find spittlebug fecal foam far from flavorful and proceed to wipe off the offending substances rather than make a meal of the nymph. The ant-repellent compounds also appear to be non-irritating to living tissue which would make them particularly interesting models for new pesticides." taken from the web site Ask Nature.

Adults jump from plant to plant. They can leap 100 times their length and 2.5 feet straight up. Because of this they are sometimes called froghoppers.

The nymph poop is whipped up into bubbles. When a pile accumulates, the nymph uses its hind legs to cover itself. The spittle protects the insect from predators, temperature extremes, and keeps them from dehydrating in the sun.

Scientists do not think it harms the plants.



Pine spittlebug
Lorie Axtell