

# Notes from a Rogue entomologist: The European earwig in Fact and Fiction (Part 2)

BY RICHARD J. HILTON

First, a quick addendum to my previous story regarding the earwig, in which I stated that "There appears to be no documented evidence of earwigs inhabiting human ears." However, a reader from Williams called to notify me that while camping with some friends he had personally witnessed a case of an ear-invading earwig, so I may have been a tad hasty in exonerating the earwig and perhaps there is some factual basis for fear of earwigs crawling into your ear (although, thankfully, it does not seem to be an everyday occurrence).

Prior to the introduction of the European earwig, there was just one native species of earwig in Oregon, the Maritime earwig, which lives on the seashore eating small prey such as sand fleas. The European earwig arrived on both the East (Newport, Rhode Island) and West (Seattle, Washington) coasts around the same time, roughly one hundred years ago. This species is now well established in many areas both urban and rural. The European earwig is an omnivore. It will happily feed on other insects but will also feed on plants, particularly tender new foliage or softening fruit. The European earwig seems to thrive in the Pacific Northwest, where the earwig population became so high and posed such a nuisance in Portland that in 1924 a state of emergency was declared and a Bureau of Earwig Control was established. However, back then few insecticides were on the market and even fewer were effective. The method of control that was used at that time was biological control, using insects to fight insects. The main problem was that since the European earwig was a recent introduction to the US, there were no native insects which were adapted to feed on them. So, a common method of combating pests which have come from elsewhere is for entomologists to travel to a pest's native land to see what feeds on it there. In the case of the earwig, a parasitic fly was found in Europe and brought to the US. This fly species will lay an egg near an earwig, the egg will hatch almost immediately and the larva or maggot burrows into the earwig and then grows inside the earwig until it matures, whence it leaves the earwig much the worse for the experience. A large facility was built in Portland with the specific purpose of rearing earwigs and then parasitizing them with these flies. The parasitized earwigs were distributed widely and were also sold for a penny a piece. This type of biological control is a classic method for managing introduced pests and is still used today, though the whole process of finding and releasing an appropriate biological control agent is now highly regulated and involves considerable testing and evaluation.

Earwigs do not seem to be the scourge that they were in the 1920s, but whether the release of all those parasitic

flies was a major factor in reducing the earwig population is not entirely certain. However, it seems likely that it did have an effect. There are just not that many natural enemies of earwigs. Birds will feed on earwigs (chickens seem to like them) and that may be one reason earwigs are primarily active at night so as to avoid insectivorous birds. One other parasite of earwigs is a mermithid nematode or roundworm. These worms are soil dwelling, pale and hair-like and can get up to two inches long. When the worms are small they attack the earwigs while they are living in the soil during early spring. They grow inside the earwig and, much like the parasitic flies, consume them from the inside until the earwigs are more worm than earwig. These worms prefer moist conditions. When I first started my earwig studies, I needed a lot of earwigs and collected hundreds from an old rotting stump in my yard. It was not until later in the year that I discovered the majority of the earwigs that I had gotten from the stump were infested with these worms. I had to account for that when I evaluated the results of that year's research. Various studies, including my own, have shown that earwigs inhabiting apples and pears cause hardly any injury to the fruit and will consume many pest insects such as apple aphids and pear psylla. The situation is different in peaches, where earwigs can injure the fruit, particularly as the peaches soften near harvest time. In an unsprayed peach orchard it often seems that every split pit contains an adult earwig.

The topic of split pits brings me to the earwig in fiction. Insects do not generally play lead roles in literary fiction. One obvious exception is Gregor Samsa who turns into a giant cockroach or beetle (depending on the translation) in Franz Kafka's *The Metamorphosis* but at least he does start out human. However, a European earwig has the title role in the story "Gaston" by William Saroyan, who is probably best known as the author of *The Human Comedy*. The earwig is found in the split pit of a peach by a father and daughter, and while I do not want to give away any spoilers, let's just say the story could have been titled "An Insect Tragedy." In short, earwigs, like most of us, have their good side and their bad side. While they can cause problems in the garden as they feed on tender foliage in the spring or be a nuisance as they seek shelter in your rose blossoms or crawl into your house, please remember that earwigs can also provide valuable assistance in controlling pest populations in our apple and pear trees.

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## APPLEGATE OUTBACK: MY OPINION

### Be prepared: Details

BY BOB FISCHER



I wasn't always a legend. Once, I was just another Joe trying to get a deer rack that didn't look like a pair of eagle #2 fishhooks stuck in a potato. Then, on one dismal morning, everything changed. I'd been in my homemade tree stand, waiting for a deer for three miserable hours. Hoping it might warm me up a bit, I'd eaten all two pounds of Rick Montoya's recipe of homemade chili. It was a ticking time bomb. Due to the fact that I'd accidentally substituted some chopped prunes for raisins as a snack adding some urgency to the problem..

Attempting to leave my perch of pain I slipped on the rain-greased plywood and fell from my wretched roost. I began shearing twigs and branches on the way down. Two feet from the forest floor, my earthbound plummet stopped and I was flung skyward by my industrial strength suspenders, which had caught on a limb.

This hideous activity repeated itself again and again as I rocketed up and rocketed down. After an eternity, I was able to grab the tree stand at the last second and began hanging upside down like a wet, whimpering olive drab tree sloth. I spent the rest of the season in my den. What did I learn from that season-wrecking ride? For one thing, I've learned that an entire hunt can be ruined simply by messing with your stomach. In other words, details. Brother, your success depends on your attention to details, and since that day, I've never left anything to chance.

Take the rifle scopes, for example, the average hunter never trains for looking

through a scope, but I do! Three months prior to hunting season I begin wearing my Buckeye training glasses. You can get lenses to match the power and reticule of your scope. The glasses are guaranteed to fail when you least expect it, just as in real life. Those who use cheap scopes will want to train with the nearly opaque frosted lenses that the company provides at no extra cost. "Details."

Have you ever had a fishing trip ruined when you slammed the car door on your fishing rod? I solved that problem by cutting 6 inch sawtooth notches all the way around my car door. Now I can slam it on a canoe paddle and the wood won't be touched. A note of caution, check with your local police to make sure this is legal, since the howl of the wind passing through the notches sounds exactly like a siren.

Also, be sure to secure any objects in the back seat, since the screaming suction caused by a passing semi is enough to jerk a bowling ball through one of the notches. "Details."

"Attention to details is my motto." In fact, I just had it engraved on my best elk rifle. Unfortunately, the fellow who did the work ran out of space, so it actually reads, "Attention to made in the USA." But I wasn't upset. Even here all is not lost. You can train for failure by conditioning yourself to what you are going to have to listen to when you get home! "Details..."

Bob Fischer  
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