

Doodlebugs: nature's digging machines

Antlions are called doodlebugs because of the spiraling trails they leave in the sand while they look for a place to build their traps. The trails they leave behind appear as though someone has doodled in the sand. These interesting insects are in the family Myrmeleontidae and the genus *Myrmelo*. Although the name "doodlebug" sounds kind of cute and cuddly, this bug is anything but.

The ill fated ant or other small insect that happens by the doodlebug's trap will soon meet its doom. The antlion digs a hole or pit by walking backward and pressing its abdomen into the soil. It then backs into the loose soil and places its head under the surface. Using its head and long, sickle-shaped mandibles, the creature digs a deep pit (one – two inches). The creature literally uses its stomach as a plow and its head as a shovel. Sometimes the antlion will come upon a pebble or twig and it will attempt to flick it out with the sand. If it cannot accomplish this, it will push the object out of the pit. Once the trap is constructed, the bug finds its place at the bottom of the new found pit and opens its jaws wide. Then it waits.

Once the unfortunate insect falls into the trap, it scrambles to get out, but the sand is loose and it will eventually slide to the bottom where the jaws are waiting with baited breath. Insects that are unfortunate enough to land into one of these funnel like pits rarely escape. Once the antlion spots the ill-fated victim, it reaches up with its elongated mandibles and pulls it under the surface. It then paralyzes the prey and literally sucks the life out of it! Once the antlion is done with its meal, it discards the shriveled carcass out of its home with a flip of its head.

Gruesome though it is the doodlebug has even stranger habits. If the creature hasn't eaten in a while and is really hungry, it constructs an even bigger pit to catch prey. Antlions can build several traps and repeat these feedings over a period of three years until they fully mature. Once they are fully grown they form a cocoon in the ground and transform to the adult stage.

Chances are that you will never see an immature antlion because they spend most of their lives at the bottom of a pit. They are also the same color as their environment, so even if one were out for a stroll, it would be difficult to spot. If you were to see one however, it would be about an inch and a half long with a flat, thin body. The identifying characteristic of the doodlebug is the sickle-shaped mandibles protruding out of their heads.

Even adult antlions are not seen very often by humans. In contrast to their younger stage of life, once the creature matures to adulthood it is rather delicate looking. Some say they resemble the beautiful damselfly. They are only active at night and only live for about a month.

The habitat of choice for this unusual creature is a sandy environment. However, doodlebugs have been found in quartz sand, red sandstone, dust, humus, rotted wood, gypsum and coal ashes. They do need to have dry and loose material to make their pits. The antlion is designed for digging. When in the larval stage, the abdomen is blunt and gradually tapers down toward the posterior allowing the creature to slide backward easily through the sand. In addition, the hairs on the body are curled forward which also helps it to move backward more easily.

Antlions have a way of getting along. If other antlions are constructing pits nearby, the creatures will adjust spacing between each hole so they won't interfere with each other.

These amazing creatures are harmless to people. They do not cause damage to plants or structures. They eat insects that may be considered pests. And they can provide hours of entertainment to those interested enough to seek them out and watch them in action.

To attract antlions to your area, place sand under the eaves next to your house in an area that stays dry. Keep an eye on the sand and soon you may see depressions or pits. These are most likely the homes of the doodlebugs.