

COLUMNISTS

Would you jump for a grasshopper burger?

Randy Deming Special to the Reporter-News

Published 5:00 p.m. CT Jan. 9, 2022

I just read grasshoppers are considered a healthy source of protein. Hamburger, for example, is 18 percent protein and 18 percent fat. On the other hand, cooked grasshopper contains up to 60 percent protein with just 6 percent fat. If we ever develop a taste for them, we might find it better to raise grasshoppers instead of cattle. Our future order at McDonald's might include a McGrasshopper burger.

Grasshoppers are amazing insects. They are the undisputed champions of the long jump. Mike Powell set humanity's long jump record in 1991 with a distance of 8.95 meters. This was 4.6 times his length, but your typical grasshopper can easily jump more than twenty times its body length without using its wings and with no wind to aid its jump. Imagine if humans had the ability to jump across a football field in one go.

Grasshoppers feed voraciously on plants. I would have to eat one hundred pounds of food every day to match their consumption. This is the reason grasshoppers are considered pests in many environments.

You might recall how hard it was trying to snatch one up as a child. Grasshoppers are strong fliers and use their wings to escape predators and to swarm to find food.

Swarming grasshoppers are called locusts, and swarming occurs when there is overcrowding. The largest recorded swarm occurred in 1875 in the Western United States, and destroyed all vegetation in its 1,800-mile-long and 110-mile-wide path. There were an estimated 12.5 trillion insects — still the largest concentration of one species ever recorded on the planet.

Of the 150 species of grasshoppers in Texas, I have identified six species on my 10 acres in Callahan County. Two types are among the most destructive to agriculture: the differential grasshopper and the bird grasshopper. The presence of many varied species is the sign of a

healthy environment that prevents the dominance of one species and the formation of swarms which can cause widespread damage to crops.

Grasshoppers can only survive the winter as an egg. Mating occurs in late summer and fall and shortly afterward, females will deposit a cluster of eggs into a patch of soft soil. The nymphs will hatch in the spring and closely resemble miniature adults.

In some species, males offer a nuptial gift in the form of a sweet substance excreted from glands on their bodies. Grasshopper males learned a long time ago the benefits of bringing a girl candy.

CNN recently reported grasshoppers have devoured so much vegetation in the western United States that many ranchers fear rangelands could be stripped bare. Consequently, the USDA is mounting its biggest extermination campaign in over 40 years. They are spraying pesticides over thousands of acres. This is very unfortunate because these measures will also threaten other insect species including monarch butterflies.

To address this problem, The University of Arizona is developing a “Grasshopper Harvester,” which consists of a large vacuum operated by remote control. This invention will hopefully minimize the widespread use of pesticides which kill many beneficial insects. The harvested grasshoppers would be used to feed livestock and poultry.

I have not been remarkably successful with gardening, but I do have a good crop of grasshoppers which are gobbled up by my chickens, who lay eggs which I enjoy eating. I prefer my grasshoppers in the form of scrambled eggs. I do not think I am quite ready to try a McGrasshopper burger.

Randy Deming is a member of the Big Country Master Naturalist program in Abilene. To learn more about the Texas Master Naturalist program and how you can get involved, go to txmn.tamu.edu or the local Facebook page @BCTXMN.