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## SUMMERTIME ANTLION SAFARI

Here's an oddity in nature that you can share with kids. They will think it is really something weird or different. Summertime is the time the antlions appear and for furious action, try going on an antlion safari.

This is the time of year homeowners may notice small funnel-shaped pits next to their foundations, usually in dry, fine soil. Often these pits are under the eaves or next to porches, areas that are protected from direct rainfall. Observant homeowners may also notice that as the summertime progresses, the pits become larger in diameter and more widely spaced apart. Hidden under the soil at the bottom of each pit, a predatory immature antlion waits for unsuspecting ants and other small insects to fall into the pit.

The immature antlions are kind of ugly if you dig them out and look at them. They have a broad, flattened body, short legs, (best suited for crawling backward) and a flat head with long, sickle-shaped mandibles. The larvae do not resemble the adult antlions, which look like a small damselfly and have a slender body and delicate outstretched wings.

Antlion larvae do not seem to care about the type of soil in which they dig. Pits have been found in quartz sand, red sandstone, dust, humus, rotted wood, gypsum and coal ashes. The consistent requirement seems to be that the substrate must be composed of small, dry, loose particles. If you want to attract antlions, place sand under the eaves next to your house in an area that nearly always stays dry.

An antlion excavates its pit by using its oval-shaped abdomen as a plow and its flat head as a shovel for flicking sand upward. It circles backward through the sand and repeatedly flicks sand upward, raising its head above the soil surface. If an antlion larva encounters a small pebble or other object when it is constructing its pit, it will attempt to flick the object out of its pit. If the object is too large to flick but large enough to move, it may literally be "pushed" up and out of the pit by the larva. When the pit is completed, the larva lies motionless on the bottom, concealed beneath the sand, with only its long, piercing mandibles exposed.

When an ant or other small insect accidentally steps inside the rim of the pit, it will slip on the soft sand particles on the side of the pit and fall to the bottom. The unfortunate victim usually becomes impaled by the antlion's piercing mandibles. But if it tries to escape, the antlion will flick sand and shower the prey. As this storm of loose sand falls on the slope of the pit, it speeds up the treadmill effect. Eventually the prey tumbles to the bottom toward the waiting antlion.

After the prey has been captured, the antlion drags the victim deeper into the sand where it sucks out its body fluids. The antlion then disposes of the carcass by flicking it out of the pit.

Antlions are absolutely harmless and causes no damage to flowers, people or structures. They are highly beneficial and feed on ants and other insects that fall into their traps. It is best to leave them alone. But it is interesting for kids (and adults, too) to watch them make their pits and catch



their prey. You can speed up the process by dropping an ant or other small insect in their pit. For a picture of an antlion, go to the Internet at: <http://ianrpubs.unl.edu/wildlife/g672.htm>

This is a NebGuide entitled "Backyard Wildlife Making It Come Alive."

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