

Located at:

[www.scottchurchdirect.com](http://www.scottchurchdirect.com) >> [www.scottchurchdirect.com/ted-williams-archive.aspx/2003](http://www.scottchurchdirect.com/ted-williams-archive.aspx/2003)

## Earth Almanac: January/March 2003

By Ted Williams

Attack of the June Bugs

Uncommon Courtship

Teddy Bears' Picnic

Beloved Serpents

The Gilded West

Dancing Gig

### Attack of the June Bugs



Photo by David M. Schleser/Photo Researchers

June bugs—those huge, fearsome-looking scarab beetles that bang fiendishly against your screens on soft spring evenings—are much prized by children, who find them useful for frightening adults. June-bug phobia is a centuries-old tradition in the New World. As essayist Sarah O. Jewett noted in August 1872: "Your life is made so wretched by their whizzing past your ears and dropping upon your table, not to speak of the horrible fear of their entangling themselves in your hair. ... We ought to sympathize more tenderly with our young-lady friends who spend long seasons of dejection on the hall stairs because two or three energetic June Beetles have happened to come into the parlor to spend a social evening." June bugs appear to seek entry to houses because they are attracted to light, and they bang because flying mobility has been sacrificed for protection by a second set of hard wings that are extended to the sides in flight. Like all proper monsters, most of the 200 or so species distributed throughout North America emerge from the earth at night. All are harmless. But the fat, white larvae of about 25 species feed on the roots of grass and, in large concentrations, can damage your lawn.

Located at:

[www.scottchurchdirect.com](http://www.scottchurchdirect.com) >> [www.scottchurchdirect.com/ted-williams-archive.aspx/2003](http://www.scottchurchdirect.com/ted-williams-archive.aspx/2003)

## Uncommon Courtship

Common terns are now courting where gently sloping land, especially islands, meets the sea and big lakes in northern temperate zones around the globe. Watch for their distinctive flight displays in which a male, shadowed by a female, flies along with a small fish in his bill. When she overtakes him, he'll drop his head, turn away, and hold his wings high over his back. At the same time she'll thrust her head forward and hold her wings down, then start a sharp downward glide, tilting from side to side. On the ground a male may march in front of the female in a semicircle, lower his head, raise his head, bend forward, and kick back with his feet. Often he'll carry a small fish, presumably a signal of his intention to copulate. The female expresses interest—at least in the fish—by emitting a *ki-ki* call and hunching over. Sometimes another male will ape this behavior, thereby acquiring a free meal. Also called sea swallows, these graceful, agile birds cover astonishing distances in migration. One individual, banded in Finland, was captured 16,000 miles away in Australia.

## Teddy Bears' Picnic

Black-bear cubs emerge from their dens in spring, but unlike their mothers, they have not been hibernating. Instead, they have been nursing as she slept. Now the size of small tabby cats, they are in fine flesh and frolicking in a new universe of sights, smells, sounds, and tastes. If you encounter a black-bear family in the wild, keep your distance but consider yourself blessed, not threatened. Because black bears evolved in forested habitats, they almost always react to danger by running away or climbing a tree. Our other two bear species—grizzlies and polar bears—evolved on open ground and therefore are more likely to stand and fight. Land clearing and unrestricted hunting in the late 1800s devastated black-bear populations over most of the United States. But under modern wildlife management and with the regrowth of their forest habitat, the species is making a dramatic comeback.

## Beloved Serpents

If you live east of the Mississippi, spring is the time to look for timber rattlesnakes as they come out from hibernation dens in south-facing cliffs and boulder fields. Which brings up the question: Why would you want to? Maybe because these stocky pit vipers are beautiful, secretive, and rare to the point of being semi-mythical. In Maine, Rhode Island, Michigan, and Delaware, they've not been seen in recent years and may have been extirpated—all the more reason to look for them there. Timber rattlers vary from almost jet black to yellow, with brown or black blotches on their sides and back. In the southern part of their range, a chestnut stripe may run along their backs. So shy are these snakes that if you encounter one, it will almost certainly be by your choice. And so docile are they that getting one to strike you requires major effort. Love of timber rattlers is a new cultural phenomenon in America. As recently as 1989, for example, Minnesota was paying a bounty on them. In Wisconsin, where the bounty was discontinued in 1975, one exterminator reported killing 5,700 in a single season. Now the species is protected in nine states.

Located at:

[www.scottchurchdirect.com](http://www.scottchurchdirect.com) >> [www.scottchurchdirect.com/ted-williams-archive.aspx/2003](http://www.scottchurchdirect.com/ted-williams-archive.aspx/2003)

## The Gilded West

The California poppy has been widely transplanted around the nation and the world, but only in its native range—California and thin slices of western Oregon, Washington, Nevada, and the Baja Peninsula—does it gild entire valleys and foothills to elevations of 7,000 feet. "To one who loves them in their glorious native hues, the white [cultivated] varieties seem almost repulsive," writes Timothy Coffey in *The History and Folklore of North American Wildflowers*. When the first Spanish explorers beheld the massive, almost fluorescent spring blooms sweeping across rich alluvial soils, they called the land the "Golden West." In fact, legend has it that California's real gold was created by the falling petals. The flowers close in late afternoon, providing snug refuge for insect pollinators that fly by day.

## Dancing Gig

The first whirligigs of spring, splattered like purple ink over a windless pond, swamp, or lazy meadow stream, will make the surface quiver at your stealthiest approach. If you wade or paddle, they will sense your presence by reading the ripples with their antennae. If you come by land, they'll see you with the top parts of compound eyes, which allow them to simultaneously take in scenes above and below the surface. The only beetles that swim on surface film, whirligigs propel themselves with oarlike hind legs; when they dive they carry their own scuba tank in the form of an air bubble. They can also fly. Of the 60 species distributed through Canada and the United States, most belong to two genera—*Dineutus* (about half an inch long) and *Gyrinus* (a quarter-inch or less). The whirligigs you see now have spent the winter sleeping in the mud. Soon they will breed, lay eggs on the stems of submerged vegetation, and die. The new generation of adults will appear in late summer. Catching whirligigs is just difficult enough to make it grand sport for small children. Fish have an easier time of it, but once inside their jaws, whirligigs emit a vile-tasting goo that induces regurgitation.