

9 ways to repel deer flies and horse flies

By Aislinn Sarnacki, BDN Staff • September 1, 2019 7:00 am



Courtesy of Griffin Dill

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A deer fly with an interesting yellow and black pattern. There are many different species of deer flies, and they display different patterns and colors.

Deer flies and horse flies can easily ruin an outdoor experience. They swarm, ricochet off your skin and buzz around your ears. Their bites are nearly as painful as bee stings, and they're absolutely relentless in their pursuit. But there are a few things you can do to fight back.

Over the years, outdoor enthusiasts have experimented with different methods of repelling — or at least discouraging — these flies, of which there are [over 350 species living throughout the United States and Canada](#).

Here are a few things to try:

1. Test out liquid repellents.

The jury is still out on whether or not liquid insect repellent is effective against deer flies and horse flies. After all, these types of flies hunt primarily by sight, not scent.

A [fact sheet written by Lee Townsend](#), extension entomologist University of Kentucky College of Agriculture, states that manmade chemical repellents such as DEET “can provide several hours of protection” from deer flies and horse flies.

Some claim that mixtures of certain essential oils — including peppermint, citronella and lavender — will drive deer flies and horse flies away. If interested, here’s [a recipe by Good Living Essential Oils](#).

2. Stay still.

Deer flies and horse flies are attracted to movement, according to Howard Russell, an entomologist at Michigan State University. Therefore, you may be able to escape notice if you just remain still. It’s worth a shot.

3. Go the distance.

You can’t run faster than these pests can fly, Russell said. They’re among the fastest flying of all insects. But if you keep running — or hiking or biking or paddling — you may be able to outdistance them.

“They can be quite territorial,” said Jim Dill, a pest management specialist for the University of Maine Cooperative Extension. “As you’re walking along, one fly can bounce around your head and after you’ve gone 10 to 15 feet, oftentimes it will leave you.”

Unfortunately, it may not be long until another finds you.

4. Wear light colors.

In addition to motion, deer flies and horse flies are attracted to dark colors, specifically blue, according to [instructions on how to make a deer fly trap](#) written by Russell Mizell at the University of Florida. And they don’t appear to be as attracted to light colors or white.

Russell has noticed this phenomenon while driving his white pick-up truck, which has black side mirrors.

“I live up the road about a third of a mile through a swamp,” Russell said. “When I drive out, I have anywhere between 50 and 100 flies buzzing around each mirror.”

5. Avoid water.

The life of a deer fly or horse fly begins as larvae in the mud along pond edges and streambanks or in wetland areas. It then crawls to a drier area to pupate and emerge as an adult. Therefore, you may notice that you find more of these flies near water.

6. Always wear a hat.

One of the most effective ways to protect yourself from biting flies is to cover up with

plenty of clothing. And when it comes to deer flies and horse flies, the first thing to cover is your head.

“Always wear a hat,” said Russell. “They seem to be attracted to the back of your head.”

Both deer flies and horse flies will actually burrow into your hair to bite your scalp. Wearing a hat will block them from biting the top of your head. And if your hat has a brim, it may keep flies off your face, ears and neck, as well.

7. Make a sticky hat.

It may not win you any fashion awards, but a hat with an adhesive surface is one of the best ways to put deer flies and horse flies out of commission. To make a “deer fly trap hat,” Russell slathers a sticky substance called Tree Tanglefoot on the back of a hat.

“Then I just put it on and walk around the garden. Pretty soon I have 50-60 flies on it,” Russell said.

8. Don a dryer sheet.

Some outdoor enthusiasts say that the strong, soapy scent of [dryer sheets will ward off deer flies](#) and horse flies. Application varies. Some people rub the dryer sheets on their clothing and skin, while others will tuck the sheets into their hats. There’s plenty of anecdotal evidence that backs up this method of defense, but scientific evidence is tough to find. However, [a study in 2010 found that Bounce dryer sheets repelled fungus gnats](#).

9. Make friends with a tall person.

It’s a joke, but there’s some truth to it. Deer flies and horse flies tend to swarm the highest part of a moving object. Therefore, if you’re walking beside someone who is taller than you, the flies may be more attracted to your companion.
