

Kissing Bugs



Triatoma protracta. Photo courtesy of Justin Schmidt.

Kissing Bugs belong to the family of assassin bugs (Reduviidae) in the Order Hemiptera. Although there are many kinds of assassin bugs only a few feed on bird and mammal blood—the kissing bugs.

The species most commonly found in California is *Triatoma protracta*. This is a large black or dark brown insect, with slightly paler wings and a long narrow head. Immature forms closely resemble adults except that they lack wings.

The long needle-like beak containing the mouthparts is held folded beneath the head. Adults are slightly less than 1 inch long. Immature forms closely resemble adults except that they lack wings. Kissing Bugs are nocturnal and hide in cracks and crevices by day.

In California these bugs occur in the hill country in the Coastal Mountain Range and in the foothills of the Sierra Nevada. They are closely associated with rodents and live in their nests, particularly the nests of wood rats. All life stages of Kissing Bugs feed on blood.

There are two reasons why it is so important to remove all brush and piles of debris away from homes in California. Fire protection is certainly one of these reasons. However, equally important is the relationship between kissing bugs and wood rats. Wood rats build nests in piles of branches, twigs and other debris. They commonly build their nests under or beside structures, which allows ready access to the home by kissing bugs living in the wood rats nest.

Kissing bugs transmit pathogens that cause Chagas' Disease in Central and South America. Although these bugs apparently transmit no human pathogens in California, they do carry the Protozoa that cause Chagas' Disease. The bite of kissing bugs can be painful, and often causes serious allergic reactions.

Adult kissing bugs are attracted to lights at night and may enter homes this way. It is important to kill Kissing Bugs when they are found in or around the home, as they can become established indoors, feeding on the occupants, including humans and pets.

The bite of a kissing bug can be recognized by the swelling, and often bruising around the bite wound. During feeding the bite is painless. However, these insects are capable of giving a painful defensive bite. Symptoms caused by bites can generally be treated with antihistamines and ice packs. However, if there is extensive swelling and the victim has any difficulty breathing, this indicates that the victim is having an acute allergic reaction and it is essential to get medical assistance as soon as possible. Extreme allergic reactions occur more frequently from Kissing Bug bites than from the bites of any other North American insects.