

## Scuttle Flies



Scuttle fly. Photo courtesy of Charles Lewallen, from bugguide.net.

Scuttle flies are also known as hump-backed flies and coffin flies. The name scuttle fly refers to the jerky, flitting, running behavior typical of the adults. Coffin fly derives from the habit of these flies to feed on remains in coffins, often digging as much as 6 feet down to reach buried carrion.

These are small, yellowish, brown and black flies, with a flattened, spiny head and highly reduced wing venation, in species that have wings. They are about the size of a *Drosophila* fruit fly, 1/16-1/4 inch long. Although they superficially resemble fruit flies, the flat spiny head and odd wings will distinguish them along with lack the red eyes typical of fruit flies. The world's smallest fly species is the phorid *Euryplatea nanaknihaili* from Thailand.

The biology of this group of flies is enormously diverse. There are predatory species, as well as



Typical scuttle fly wing venation.

parasites, social insect nest inquilines and scavengers. Some species are predators or parasites of earthworms, snails, spiders, millipedes, centipedes and insects, to name a few. Others are parasites of wasps, bees and ants. Pest species breed in decaying organic matter, particularly carrion and sewage contaminated soil. A few species breed in human corpses even under nearly anaerobic conditions, such as can occur in deeply buried coffins or in sealed above ground crypts. There are also a few species that are pests of mushroom cultures.

Adult scuttle flies feed on nectar, honey dew, and fluid exuding from carrion and dung. Because they frequent microbe-laden, unsanitary places they can transport disease causing pathogens from the places where they breed and feed to food materials.

Species of *Megascelia* are serious pests in the food producing, food handling and food processing industries. They can also be problems in health care facilities. In buildings these flies will breed wherever there is damp, high nutrient material available, including sewage-soaked soil, exposed garbage, carcasses, rotting fruit and vegetables, poorly stored meats, and organic deposits in drains.

These flies are good indicators of plumbing problems. The presence of scuttle flies in facilities where no food is available or being processed indicates the presence of leaking sewer lines close by. Their presence in homes also indicates leaking plumbing or the presence of carrion or other high protein sources, like old used diapers.

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