

Jerusalem Crickets

Jerusalem crickets are among the largest insects found in western North America. They range in size from 1-2½ inches long. In North America they are found only west of the Rocky Mountains. The large shiny brown abdomen with dark stripes, large ovoid head, and spiny hind legs are diagnostic features of these crickets. Both juvenile stages and adults are wingless and crawl slowly.

These large crickets belong to the family Stenopelmatidae. The most widespread species found in California is *Ammopelmatus fuscus*.

Even though they are essentially harmless, there is considerable mythology about the dangerous nature of these large wingless, ground dwelling insects. Much of this mythology is due to their large size, large, bald humanoid head, and massive jaws. Jerusalem Crickets can bite, so some care should be taken when handling them; otherwise, despite their ferocious appearance, they are harmless. They are also not considered to be agricultural pests, as they do not cause noticeable damage to garden or crop plants.

Although the officially recognized common name for this insect is Jerusalem Cricket, a number of other names also are used including: "Potato Bugs", Woh-tzi-Neh ("old bald-headed man") or "Niña de la Tierra" ("little girl of the earth"). The name "Potato Bugs" is used because they occasionally will feed on potato tubers.

Jerusalem crickets are nocturnal, coming out at night to feed. During the day, particularly in the summer months, they can be found underneath rocks, logs or boards. These crickets are to some extent scavengers, feeding on plant roots and tubers, and sometimes even on dead animal matter. Unlike most other crickets, female Jerusalem Crickets sometimes kill the males after mating. Jerusalem crickets can generate sound by rubbing the back leg against the side of the abdomen (stridulation).

These large crickets are an important source of food, particularly during the winter for a number of different birds of prey including barn and burrowing owls and small hawks, like kestrels.



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