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ON THE WEB

Just Try to Sleep Tight. The Bedbugs Are Back.

By ANDREW JACOBS
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They're the scourge of hobo encampments and hot-sheet motels. To impressionable children everywhere, they're a snippet of nursery rhyme, an abstract foe lurking beneath the covers that emerges when mommy shuts the door at night.

But bedbugs on Park Avenue? Ask the horrified matron who recently found her duplex teeming with the blood-sucking beasts. Or the tenants of a co-op on Riverside Drive who spent \$200,000 earlier this month to purge their building of the pesky little thugs. The Helmsley Park Lane was sued two years ago by a welt-covered guest who blamed the hotel for harboring the critters. The suit was quietly settled last year.



Robert Stolarik for The New York Times

Despite the light, a bedbug seized a chance to feed at the American Museum of Natural History in New York.

And bedbugs, stealthy and fast-moving nocturnal creatures that were all but eradicated by DDT after World War II, have recently been found in hospital maternity wards, private schools and even a plastic surgeon's waiting room.

Bedbugs are back and spreading through New York City like a swarm of locusts on a lush field of wheat.

Infestations have been reported sporadically across the United States over the past few years. But in New York, bedbugs have gained a foothold all across the city.

"It's becoming an epidemic," said Jeffrey Eisenberg, the owner of Pest Away Exterminating, an Upper West Side business that receives about 125 bedbug calls a week, compared with just a handful five years ago. "People are being tortured, and so am I. I spend half my day talking to hysterical people about bedbugs."

Last year the city logged 377 bedbug violations, up from just 2 in 2002 and 16 in 2003. Since July, there have been 449. "It's definitely a fast-emerging problem," said Carol Abrams, spokeswoman for the city housing agency.

In the bedbug resurgence, entomologists and exterminators blame increased immigration from the developing world, the advent of cheap international travel and the recent banning of powerful pesticides. Other culprits include the recycled mattress industry and those thrifty New Yorkers who revel in the discovery of a free sofa on the sidewalk.

And that new mattress delivered from a reputable department store, which kindly hauled away your old one? It may have spent all day in a truck wedged against an old mattress collected from a customer with a bedbug problem.

Once introduced into a home, bedbugs can crawl into adjoining apartments or hitch a ride to another part of town in the cuff of a pant leg.

"Anyone who stays in a hotel, rich or poor, can bring them home in a suitcase," said Richard Kourbage, whose company, Kingsway Exterminating in Brooklyn, does about a dozen bedbug jobs a day. "Some of the best hotels in New York have them."

Unlike mice and roaches, which are abetted by filthy surroundings, bedbugs do just fine in a well-scrubbed home, although bedroom clutter gives them more places to hide and breed. When engorged with blood, they grow slightly plumper than the O on this page, although the nymphs, which appear almost translucent before their first meal, are not much bigger than the period at the end of this sentence.

And they don't dwell just in mattresses and box springs: any wall or floor crack the thickness of a playing card can accommodate a bedbug. Although some people try to treat the problem themselves, most hire exterminators, at \$300 per room.

The modern bedbug is immune to hardware-store-variety insecticides, and setting off a cockroach bomb in the bedroom will only scatter them farther afield. And because they are active only at night, many people don't discover them until their population has grown into the hundreds, or even thousands.

Exterminators recommend bagging and washing every bit of clothing and fabric in the room and taking apart bureau drawers and bed frames in preparation for the application of four kinds of chemicals. The process often needs to be repeated.

Worst of all, bedbug sufferers say, is the stigma of living with an insect that feeds on blood - though it does not transmit disease - and leaves behind a trail of red bumps that many dermatologists mistakenly identify as hives or scabies.

"People come in here and cry on my shoulder," said Andy Linares, the owner of Bug Off Pest Control, in Washington Heights. "They feel ashamed, even traumatized, to have these invisible vampires living in their home. Rats, even V.D., is more socially acceptable than bedbugs."

In interviews with more than a dozen bedbug sufferers, only a handful would speak on the record, saying they feared the condemning glares of neighbors or the shunning of co-workers. A bedbug infestation, many say, puts a strain on relationships, all but ruling out staying the night.



Robert Stolarik for The New York Times

Samples of bedbugs pinned to a display drawer in the entomology lab at the American Museum of Natural History in Manhattan.

Like many "bedbug victims," as some call themselves, Josie Torielli has become consumed with the biology of bedbugs since she found them in her home last year. She blamed mosquitoes for the blotches on her body until she turned on the lights one night and found a few of the fiends crawling across her sheets.

She thought she had them conquered, but last week, after nine months of peace, Ms. Torielli discovered the telltale red spots on her sheets, the result of blood-engorged bugs crushed during the night.

"I've become obsessed," said Ms. Torielli, 33, a student who lives in Hell's Kitchen, in Manhattan. "I switched to white sheets so I can see them better, and I've set up a bedbug jail in a Tupperware container that I put on the windowsill to torture them with daylight. It's all-out war."

Bedbugs prefer human hosts, but will feed on dogs or cats if necessary. They can live longer than a year, with the female laying up to 500 eggs in a lifetime. An adult bedbug can survive unfed for up to a year.

"They're kind of amazing," said Louis Sorkin, an entomologist at the American Museum of Natural History, explaining how a bedbug, a *Cimex lectularius*, emits one pheromone to find another bedbug and another to warn others of danger. In heavy infestations, the pheromones give a room a sweet, musty odor.

To show off the insect's special sucking stylus, Mr. Sorkin removed a bedbug nymph from a container and placed it on his finger. Even under a bright light and being nudged by tweezers, it began to feed and turned rust-colored as it filled with blood.

"They're insatiable," he said five minutes into the bug's feeding.

All this science is not much comfort to those in the throes of battle. Kellianne Scanlan, 30, a hairstylist who lives in Washington Heights, has been living like a nomad since last month, when she spotted a bedbug on her pillow, and then whole families ensconced in the frame of her platform bed. Despite the visit of an exterminator, the problem has not been vanquished, and every last item of clothing is sealed in plastic bags and piled up on the living room floor.

"My life has become all about bedbugs," she said as an exterminator arrived last week.

She said that to calm her friends and to ensure that she does not spread the bugs, she takes an extra set of clothing and changes when she arrives at their homes for overnight visits. "The psychological damage is probably the worst thing about it. I mean, how long will it be before I can sleep soundly and not worry about some creature sucking my blood?"

Still, for Ms. Scanlan, there has been a silver lining. The night after she discovered the bugs, she went out drinking, intent on avoiding her own bed. That evening she met a man at a bar, and, contrary to her usual instincts, accompanied him to his apartment. An encounter partly born of desperation soon blossomed into something more, she said.

"We've been together ever since," Ms. Scanlan said with a smile. "Thanks to the bedbugs, I've fallen in love."