

Blood-Sucking Assassins of Cloudbridge

Cloudbridge Nature Reserve - Nature Notes No. 26

Beware the Wheel Bug, *Arilus cristatus*, a slow-moving but ruthless predator of the forest. The name comes from the cog-like appendage on its back. All the better to distract the unaware.

The Wheel Bug has some of the best-developed mouthparts of any True Bug. Its formidable orange beak (see picture below) arises at the anterior end of its long tubular head and unfolds forward. When it encounters a prey item -- usually some adult insect or caterpillar -- it typically lunges forward in its own deliberate way, grabs onto the prey with its front legs, and buries its hypodermic beak into some soft body part of the hapless prey. The Wheel Bug then injects enzyme-laden saliva, which immobilizes the prey within 30 seconds and turns its parts into porridge. Then -- the predatory bug sucks out all the victim's bodily fluids! This activity, of course, kills the prey item, which is why the Wheel Bug is classified in the Reduviidae -- the Assassin Bug Family. It's worth noting that Wheel Bugs aren't all that particular about where they stick their beaks -- which is fair warning that humans should use appropriate care when handling one.



Arilus cristatus, wheel bug or assassin bug

"When disturbed, the wheel bug can inflict a painful bite. The bite has been described variously as worse than stings from bees, wasps, or hornets. In general, initial pain often is followed by numbness for several days. The afflicted area often becomes reddened and hot to the touch, but later may become white and hardened at the puncture area. Occasionally, a hard core may slough off, leaving a small hole at the puncture site. Healing time varies but usually takes two weeks and may take half a year."



Behold the Wheel Bug in action:
Arilus cristatus - the Wheel Bug of Costa Rica