



Flies

you can't live with them...
you can't live without them!

As a nature lover it pains me to say that I don't really like flies.

That is, of course, a gross oversimplification as there are over 7,000 fly species in the UK and I only really know a few of them. OK, I like hoverflies and the wonderfully colourful bluebottles and greenbottles (which are also useful pollinators and whose maggots are helpful to forensic scientists to help calculate the time of death of bodies).

However, I don't like mosquitos, midges and horseflies for obvious reasons. But it's the fruit flies and house flies in the kitchen right now that are giving the whole fly population a bad name.

Their prevalence in the house is largely due to all the open doors and windows in the warm weather and their incredible sense of smell, located in their antenna, which guides them to all the goodies in the kitchen.

Anyone who has played 'hide the ripe pineapple' somewhere in the house can attest to their great sense of smell – they soon find it!



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But, in many ways, you have to begrudgingly admire them...

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1. They are incredibly well adapted to reproduce at an astonishing rate.

Fruit flies, *Drosophila melanogaster*, are famously used in laboratory experiments relating to genetics. Six Nobel Prizes have been awarded to scientists for their work using this fly! The main reason they are so useful is they complete their lifecycle from egg to adult in as little as 7 days – the same as for houseflies. I guess this fast lifecycle has evolved to make use of a short-lived food supplies e.g. decaying fruit.

2. Their reaction times are far better than any human so catching them with your bare hand is very hard.

They react 5-6 times quicker than us humans – a combination of fast eyesight, pressure sensitive hairs and quick processing. Effectively they see us in slow motion so easily avoid our hands (but not the accelerated whip of a fly swat!).

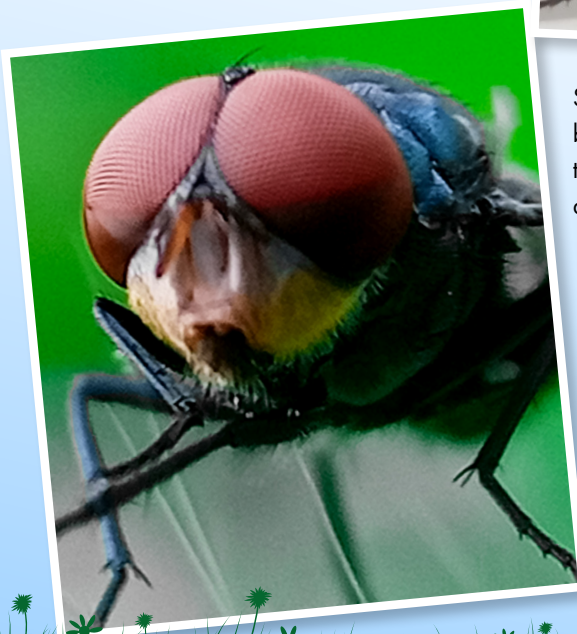
3. They are incredibly agile flyers

Flies are insects from the order Diptera, the Greek for 'two wings'. Having one pair of wings distinguishes flies from most other flying insects that have four wings in two pairs. The missing wings have evolved into halteres (the French for dumbbell – reflecting their shape) which are organs that sense rotation, giving flies precise control of their flightpath.



4. In close up, they are stunning creatures

To the naked human eye many flies look largely black but in close up they are more interesting. The fruit fly has dainty pinkish eyes and a yellowish body whereas the house fly has bright red compact eyes and a hairy thorax and abdomen (if you have seen the film 'The Fly' you may recall the bristly hairs growing from a wound on Jeff Goldblum's back as he turned into a fly!).



5. They do the dirty work of nature, helping breakdown organic matter from cow pats and the like, to food and other dead plant material

Whilst this is essential, it is also what makes flies a health risk for humans and perhaps in lies an inherited dislike of them? Flies feed and lay eggs on faeces, rubbish, and rotting meat. As they walk germs stick to their legs, feet, and mouthparts allowing them to potentially spread dangerous bacteria like Salmonella, E. coli, and Campylobacter that cause severe stomach cramps, vomiting, and diarrhea.



So next time you see flies in your kitchen, briefly reflect on the evolutionary path that has made them so successful and well adapted, before showing how man has evolved to the pinnacle of evolution by deploying your fly swat!

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