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I have washed my car five times in the last two weeks. Anyone that knows me can tell you this deviates from my usual behavior. The cause of my compulsive cleanliness? It's the season of love -- loveBUGS that is. These oddly paired up little insects are everywhere: splattered on my windshield, in my tea at my favorite outdoor café, in my hair, and in my kitchen. Not being an entomologist, I thought I would learn a little bit about these seasonal houseguests.

These black and orange lovebugs are actually a type of fly native to Central America. They've expanded their range north as far as Wilmington, NC. A common question is if these flies bite or not, and the answer is no. The larvae are beneficial because they help decompose dead plants, and the adults feed on nectar or pollen from flowers. Right around this time of year, depending on rainfall and other environmental conditions, the adults emerge and set about finding a mate. This swarming period may last several weeks.

When the flies find their significant other, they are literally attached to each other, hence the name lovebugs. Watching them land and crawl while they're engaged is quite comical, as the female is two to three times larger than the male and drags him around backwards. The pair are slightly more graceful in flight, and seem to travel via controlled hovering, the female meandering through the air dragging the attached male with seemingly no particular destination in mind.

Adult lovebugs have a short lifespan, with males living for 2-3 days, and females about a week. On top of that, they only fly during daylight hours, resting at night on low growing vegetation. That gives them a small window of opportunity to mate, so they use their time wisely. After laying eggs, the

female will typically die 3-4 days later. The larvae will then develop in damp areas under dead or decaying plant matter.

Unfortunately these interesting insects swarm when looking for mates and while mating. During these few weeks out of the year, their swarming can lead to minor inconveniences for us. They have been shown to be attracted to vehicle exhaust fumes, which can lead to clogging up vehicle grills, smearing windshields, and damaging paint. Beyond this, from personal experience they seem to be attracted to outdoor eating areas, landing smack in the middle of a much anticipated fried grouper sandwich.

The lovebug swarm is a short-lived event, however, so those minor inconveniences can easily be remedied. Netting stretched over a vehicle's front grills can keep dead flies from clogging radiators, wind deflectors could help keep some flies away from windshields, and detergents can be bought that make cleaning your car easier. Eating inside or within a screened area will go a long way towards keeping flies out of your dinner.

Some people have grown to love these lovebugs. They're entertaining to watch, a great teaching tool to introduce your children to the world of insects, they're important to the diets of some birds, and my dogs love to chase them. Poetry has been written about lovebugs, I have seen it with my own eyes. Chemical controls are largely ineffective and do more harm than good, so this may be one minor inconvenience we learn to live with, and perhaps even learn to enjoy.