

## Strictly Texas

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There's just something about a bug named Texas to make it personal and foster a real kinship with this unique land and its critters.

If I identify a bug or critter whose first name is Texas, I like it immediately. I think, "all right – it belongs here, it's a Texan," like the **Texas bow-legged bug**, *Hyalymenus tarsatus*, that has introduced itself to me at the black light moth sheet the last couple of years. They charge in and land on the taut sheet with a decided plop and shoot off again, which is somewhat stressful, but it's always fun to capture another photo of one if it will stay still long enough – and not land on me. I was delighted this summer to happen upon a couple's assignation on a snailseed vine, (*Cocculus diversifolius*) ensuring the continuation of the species on a sunny summer afternoon.



Texas bow-legged bugs feed on a variety of plants, especially euphorbias and seed pods of legumes and milkweeds. In the Valley, typical euphorbias are the sandmats and spurges, like graceful spurge, *Euphorbia hypericifolia* and nodding spurge, *Euphorbia nutans* and the native poinsettias. The nymph looks like a giant ant with an oversized, cubical-shaped abdomen.

Another cool critter named for our homeland is the **Texas spiny lizard**, *Sceloporus olivaceus*. They have spiny dorsal scales in an intricate pattern that change colors with habitat, temperature and lighting. Colors range from grey to tan, brown, navy blue, orange and pink. They are carnivores (insectivores) and eat beetles, wasps, grasshoppers and other insects. They are shy and nervous, can grow to eleven inches (including the tail) and are prey for snakes and raptors.



**Texas wasp moth, *Horama panthalon***, is a fun fella, once you figure he won't sting you. It's a wasp-mimicking moth. The adults drink nectar. The species is common to abundant in southmost Texas. A larval food source is desert yaupon (*Schaefferia cuneifolia*). The males have large feathering on the tibiae.



**Glassy-winged sharpshooter, *Homalodisca vitripennis*** – now that's gotta be a Texan with a skillset like that, right? It doesn't have Texas in its name but it's a Texas true bug. Sharpshooters are a subgroup of leafhopper bugs but larger, about three eighths inch long (leafhoppers are generally less than one quarter inch long). Sharpshooters are expert jumpers with powerful hind legs with a row of distinct spines on the tibia. They have piercing-sucking mouthparts and tap into and feed on xylem or phloem tissue of plants. It is estimated that they use about 70 different plant species. They lay masses of eggs on the underside of leaves and cover them with powdery white protective secretions.



**South Texas satyr, *Hermeuptychia hermybius***, is a newly named butterfly species in the Rio Grande Valley. Specific host plant information is not yet available although most Satyr butterflies use grasses as larval host.

**Texas tree cricket, *Oecanthus texensis*.** Tree crickets have very long antennae. The Texas tree cricket likes mesquite trees; they are active dusk to dawn, feeding on soft-bodied insects, like aphids; they are omnivores and also feed on leaves and fruits. They are not usually considered damaging. Their song is a continuous, musical trill.



**Texas mocis moth, *Mocis texana*,** has a pretty widespread range – most of the eastern United States and only west as far as the Rio Grande Valley. Its larval food includes various grasses, including crabgrass, in its range.

**Greater Texas bullet ant, *Neoponera villosa* – AKA hairy panther ant** has a very painful sting. In the subfamily Ponerinae (huntress ants), it is the largest ponerine in the United States, common in southmost Texas, nesting in stumps, knot-holes, logs and dead sections of live trees. They have great eyesight but don't like vibrations, according to antemporium.com. They eat a wide range of arthropods, including fruit flies, crickets, cockroaches as well as honey and fruit.



**Two myths proven:** Yes, there are unicorns, and yes, everything is bigger in Texas. Perhaps the most fun name-discovery was identifying a **Texas unicorn mantis**, *Pseudovates chlorophaea*. It



is the largest and bulkiest mantid and is found in the United States in southernmost Texas. These mantids have green wings, often with a few small brown spots; the rest of the body is various shades of brown. It seems to prefer flying insects much smaller than itself. It is an ambush-style predator and will sit and wait rather than pursuing prey. In the wild, the Texas unicorn mantis frequently eats small butterflies and moths, which explains why they are frequent visitors to my black light moth sheet set up.



**Texas brown snake**, *Storeria dekayi texana*, is nonvenomous and small (12-16 inches in length). When threatened, they will coil up, raise their head and strike repeatedly; their mouths are not big enough to bite humans, according to [wildlifeforthamerica.com](http://wildlifeforthamerica.com). The snake can vary in color from brown, tan or brick red with a faint lighter stripe down the middle of the back. Their diet includes earthworms, snails, slugs and beetles. They have specialized teeth and jaws that allow them to pull snails out of their shells and eat them, according to [biokids.edu](http://biokids.edu).

What may very well trump most of the above in diet, is the **Gulf Coast toad**, *Bufo nebulifer*, memorable for its stealth, enigmatic smile and golden stripe that begins between its eyes, like a custom-made spearhead and travels all the way down its back. Toads are carnivorous. They eat small fish, insects, flies, mosquitoes, grasshoppers, beetles, crickets, centipedes, millipedes, spiders, worms, grubs, slugs, snails and other small animals.

