

Spots in front of your eyes?

The masses of snow fleas which appear in the first days of spring emerge from leaf litter, decaying logs, woodland humus and low vegetation. Often mistaken for soot or ash that has somehow been trapped in a depression in the snow, snow fleas (Hypogastura nivicola) are a type of springtail, a primitive, wingless insect. A springlike appendage on its underside allows it to leap away from danger, hence the name.

Due to the prevalence of leaf litter, springtails, which pass the winter as adults, are the most numerous and widely-distributed insects on earth. They thrive on decaying plant and animal matter, and can also be found on quiet surface waters, ant nests, between the tide marks and the seashore and caves. Moisture is an important factor for their survival.

While most species are vegetarians, a few littoral species survive on dead marine animals. The fleas inhabiting woodlands in spring often feast on the pollen from conifer trees and on maple syrup while it is being collected.

Snow fleas often gather in groups of one-half to one million and migrate up to 25 meters over a few days. According to Elliot Maynard's book *Collemola of New York State*, depressions in the snow fill with snow fleas as the jumping insects become imprisoned in their travels over the snow. As the crowd thickens the depression becomes black. Release is gained when the fleas ride the small rivulets flowing across the countryside and gather in pools and ponds.

Some people believe that snow fleas emerge on warm sunny days to take advantage of the heat, while others say they are avoiding excess soil water from the melting snow.

Habitat protection best policy

BY TONY DUKE

Spiderplants are popular houseplants with long spidery stems and long spidery leaves. However, it's an endangered species in my house and there was a time when I would have felt little remorse if the species became extinct. But recently my friends have been keeping them in greater numbers because they were found to reduce formaldehyde gas within the home.

So spiderplants finally have a "use" and people are more interested in keeping them alive. Unfortunately the plant's namesake, the real spiders, aren't widely recognized as having a "use" and no doubt there are many people around who could care less if spiders disappeared forever. But as a biologist I know spiders play an important role in the web of nature. Despite their appearance or their usefulness to mankind it is extremely important to maintain all the parts of the web. Because, like the framework of a house, you can take away one stud from a wall with little noticeable effect, but take away a few more studs and part of the house collapses. Eventually, you're without a home.

Within Nova Scotia there are countless animals in nature's web but historically only the ones "useful" to hunters have been protected by laws. Today, hunting is regulated to the point that no animal is endangered due to hunting or trapping. In fact, these "useful" animals are now some of the most common we have. Most of our wildlife species are doing extremely well. Mild winters and extensive forest cutting have contributed to the highest

