

ILLUSTRATION BY OWEN TUCKER

DEET: the four-letter word

By Christopher Batin

IT'S THAT TIME OF YEAR AGAIN, WHEN I start donating blood. Not to the local Red Cross, but rather, to clouds of Alaska female mosquitoes. For in the skeeter world, it's the females that do the biting, while the males are the timid sapsuckers.

Despite my dislike of Alaska skeeters, they are as rugged as the state that spawned them, and the female of the species is one of the most formidable insects in the Far North. Allow me to introduce the rarely seen feminine side to you.

Female mosquitoes have six hairy legs, untrimmed nose hairs, and hooks on their feet that can hold onto the back of an angler in a boat going 40 mph. They search out blood so they can fertilize their eggs. I suspect a few have an image of "Arnold the Exterminator" tattooed on their proboscises.

The turnoff for me, however, is that a female skeeter spits on her victim before that first bite, to lubricate her mouthparts.

If I were a male skeeter, I'd also want to live apart from the "ladies" and sip only flower nectar.

I should feel special that at least my blood gets some species of animal in an amorous mood, which is the only bonding I can usually expect on a week-long outdoor adventure. Interested skeeters generate sweet buzzings in my ears, but when they give me a love nip on the lip, it hurts. I respond with a serious "itch slap" in return, yet the sacrificial bug that fell under the slap often gives others time for a bite or two.

Skeeters intrinsically know the location of all my sensitive spots that I need to lay bare during latrine breaks. I have a specially marked can of "Bare Spray" that I use, which is not to be confused with the more potent "Bear Spray." If you ever confuse the two, I predict you'll only do it once in your life.

Called BS2 for short, "Bare Spray" has limited DEET for use on delicate body parts, so "Spray and Pray," is my motto here. Biologists say it takes a few minutes for a skeeter to find a pulsing capillary, and about 4 minutes for the critter to drink its fill. From the first drop of the waders, I hum the Bachman-Turner Overdrive tune,

"Takin. Care of Business." Business needs to be finished before the song's end at 4 minutes, 48 seconds, or I'm in serious trouble.

In my ongoing efforts to prevent skeeter bites, I have indulged in a variety of homeopathic repellents. Van Helsing types know that garlic repels vampires, so I once ate seven cloves of garlic on old sourdough bread. My computer screen warped and flashed the blue screen of death at my first breath and did nothing to deter the skeeters that resembled crash-test dummies slamming into my office screen.

It was only in my darkest hour did I turn to diethyl-meta-toluamide, which is an acronym for the four-letter word, DEET. This isn't fermented grape strength repellent, but the 100-proof stuff. To these flying Draculas, it's the equivalent to FDA-approved wolfbane or RAID.

I recall a remote camping trip where I once lathered up in 100 percent DEET. I was lucky to score a first-date camping trip with a gorgeous woman to the Black River of Alaska's Interior.

There's a reason they call it the Black River.

You can't see the river, because it's black from all the damned moosekeeters there.

Clouds and clouds of nasty lil' buggers. Brown Bertha Bomber types. I didn't want to be bitten by any ninja skeeters sneaking into our tent, so I slathered copious amounts of DEET on most of my body. I even smeared a thin layer on my lips. I didn't want to be out-of-action with a honker of a skeeter bite on my kisser.

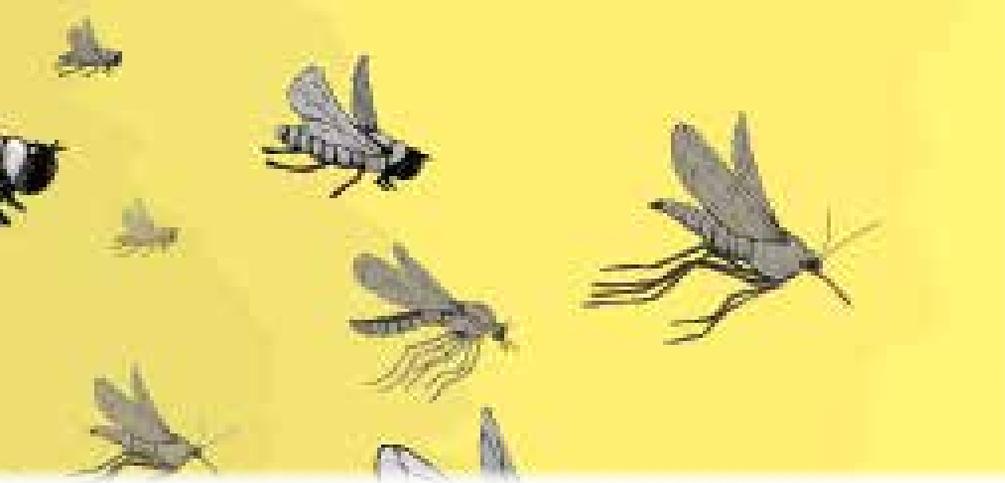
The first kiss with my girlfriend was going to be one to remember. Yet it's one I've tried to forget.

When our lips finally touched, there was the timeless pause, the "heaven in your eyes" moment.

But it wasn't the pause that refreshes.

She flung me as if I were a leaf in an Alaska typhoon and spouted off a long litany of guttural hacks, spits, and verbal regurgitations and admonishments. Her previous words of wanting to take me as a tasty morsel ended up in translation as "tasteless moron." As if this wasn't punishment enough, I soon learned DEET has a numb-

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absorb the larger DEET molecules. It's the alcohol that causes most of the irritation and dry skin, not DEET."

But beware. DEET is also a plasticizer, especially in its 95- to 100-percent concentrations. Higher-dose formulations will chemically melt plastics or make plasticware sticky to the touch. But its ability to melt plastic doesn't mean it is bad for you.

A smaller application of 100 percent DEET is much more effective than a larger dose of 30 percent DEET with its additional alcohol and other inert ingredients that can harm and dilate your skin. With 100 percent DEET, you can control how much is on your skin at any one time.

Avery recommends 30 percent DEET or a time-released 20 percent DEET lotion for

younger children if there are concerns with DEET exposure.

The time-released DEET formula is encapsulated in a soluble protein, so when it breaks down over time, it releases the DEET slowly for long-lasting protection.

An alternative is a picaridin-based, easy-on-the-skin lotion. It is DEET free and is a non-plasticizer; meaning plastic eyeglass frames to fishing lines are safe from melting. These lotions are effective for up to 14 hours in repelling both flies and mosquitoes.

Treating clothing with a spray repellent containing permethrin can also offer additional protection. One application can deter mosquitoes and flies for up 43 days, or six washings. Permethrin is neither effective nor recommended when applied directly to

human skin. Finish off by applying DEET or picaridin lotion to any exposed skin for the ultimate in protection.

The advice works. Nowadays, all lathered up with time-released DEET, I am not the least bit downtrodden in knowing I am repulsive to Alaska's mosquitoes.

While Alaska will always have my heart, I still don't want to share my blood with its resident Draculas.

Perhaps in the near future I'll have regenerated enough blood to start donating it to the Red Cross. When I'm ready, though, I expect there will be clouds of skeeters in picket lines in front of the Red Cross building.

But I'm not worried.

I'm betting the big needles, hep-locks and other blood drawing devices at the Red Cross will scare off the little buggers.

I have one major concern. My first date might be the person who will draw my blood, and I'm certain she'll be using the biggest needle she can find. I think she affectionately calls the needle "Payback."

On second thought, maybe the skeeters aren't so bad after all.

Christopher Batin is the editor of the Alaska Angler, and author of numerous books and DVDs on the Alaska outdoors at www.AlaskaAngler.com or follow him on Facebook, www.Facebook.com/TheAlaskaAngler.

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