

Mosquitoes Biting Into Tourism Business : Vermont Gets Stung by Uninvited Pests

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BRANDON, Vt. — Signs of a community under siege:

"Danger, Mosquitoes."

"Yes Mosquitoes. No Refunds."

"Don't Be Bugged: Choose From a Wide Variety of Repellents."

This year's mosquito population in parts of New England evokes images from Alfred Hitchcock's film "The Birds," in which flocks of normally benign birds attack humans.

Just ask Sue Strutz, who moved to Vermont from Michigan City, Ind., two years ago. Her husband is the one who put up the danger sign outside their home.

"On a really bad day, you can see them on the kitchen window, just swarming," she said as she waved a few away. "You walk out and you're covered."

Mosquitoes thrived this year because an unusually wet spring followed two dry years. As a result, residents are swatting three years' worth of mosquitoes at once, said Arthur Doty, chairman of the Brandon Leicester Salisbury Insect Control District.

Drop in Tourism

Some businesses say they have been hurt by the infestation, with some tourists cutting short their vacations at Lake Dunmore. The skeeters have chased children off playgrounds and picnic areas. Attendance at Branbury State Park, where Lake Dunmore is located, has dropped drastically.

Gloria Currie, a park attendant who flits in and out of her tollbooth to collect user fees while winged opportunists hover nearby, said motorists don't need to see the sign warning of the infestation.

"They roll down the window and the mosquitoes fly in," she said. They then "roll up the window and make a U-turn to leave."

Lake Dunmore lifeguard Jeff Boltz has worked with long pants and a beekeeper's veil.

"You can see clouds of mosquitoes around here," he said. "You can hear the angry hum."

Some store owners say their suppliers can't keep up with the demand for insect repellent. Booth's Junction Store in Forestdale, a village in Brandon, has sold 25 cases of the stuff.

Slogans on Shirts

T-shirts featuring a group of mosquitoes and bearing the slogan "I gave in Vermont" sold out immediately, said clerk Carol Constantine of Leicester.

Most downtown merchants have a caricature of Gov. Madeleine M. Kunin showing her with the body of the accursed insect and a stinger.

Residents don't seem to place all the blame on the state, however. Many grumble about the environmentalists who lobbied to stop the spraying of insecticides such as DDT because of health hazards.

Tasks like mowing the lawn or working in the garden require planning and courage.

"You feel like a prisoner in your own house," said Laura Peterson as she wheeled her 14-month-old son through town in a stroller equipped with mosquito netting. "Barbecues are kind of out of the question. It's no fun anymore."

Merchants fear that the publicity will hurt business even more.

"Vermont is a tourist state," said Ian Booth, owner of Booth's Junction Store in Forestdale. "It isn't good advertising."

Abatement Program Sought

The governor announced recently that she would call on the state Emergency Board to appropriate \$100,000 for a mosquito abatement program. The money will pay for a mosquito specialist and an assistant to help determine where the insects are breeding.

On a recent mild afternoon, many residents seemed hopeful. They said the problem seems to be tapering off and noted that another insecticide-spraying truck has been purchased.

Gradually rising temperatures also may ease the situation. With any luck, things will heat up before the Independence Day parade scheduled for July 1. Key additions to this year's roster of honored vehicles are two pesticide trucks.