

MObugs—Discover Missouri Insects and Spiders

Pillbug, Sowbug, Wood Louse, Rolly Poley, Doodlebug, Armadillo Bug as well as many other names are given to the same odd little creatures that call Missouri home. I think my favorite though is the name Chuggy Pig, how charming is that name? Many people mistakenly believe that these prehistoric-looking creatures are insects. Insects possess six legs, whereas these little armored tanks have seven pairs of legs. They are in fact land crustaceans and are more closely related to shrimp, lobster and crawdads. I've even heard of people who cook them and claim they smell like seafood and even taste a bit like shrimp. The name pillbug comes from an old world treatment for tummy aches. These little creatures are high in calcium carbonate. Today we take Tums, but 100 years ago there were no over-the-counter treatments available; so they often had to make do with whatever was at hand. These little creatures could be readily found and apparently worked to ease stomach pressure brought on by gas. I would imagine very few children complained of stomach aches to stay home and play hooky, after all if it meant a mouthful of these odd little "pills", I am willing to bet going to school would be preferred.



As children we called them ball bugs, or roly poly's from their habit of rolling into a ball when disturbed or feeling threatened. Not every species has this unique ability, but the one pictured here does. They have a very tough outer skin (exoskeleton) that protects them much like armor plating. Even their genus name of *Armadillium* hints at a land mammal we are all familiar with, the Armadillo. Just look at the outer casing of these creatures, and it won't take much imagination to see the similarities. They can vary in color from dark to light gray. The majority of these creatures are aquatic, but a few species have adapted to life on land by hanging around

moist areas, such as under rocks, logs, leafy vegetation and loose bark. They breathe through gills, which means survival without moisture would be impossible for them. Often times they will find their way into our basements, although they pose no health risk to humans, it could mean you have a humidity problem in your basement that needs addressed. Too much moisture is great for them, but bad for our homes and our overall health. They therefore are an indicator to us of other issues involving our structures.

They have a very unusual lifecycle. After mating, the females will carry the eggs around in a special pouch on her lower abdomen, when the tiny offspring hatch she will "deliver" her babies in what appears to be live birth. In their natural habitat they live on dead or decaying plant and animal matter, algae, moss, and bark. If they invade your local greenhouse it can be cause for alarm as they will feed on live plants and in large numbers it wouldn't take them long to cause detrimental damage.

I remember my own childhood summers, flipping over rocks to see what lived underneath. I was never disappointed by the large number and variety of ball bugs that would be present. I was completely fascinated by their ability to roll into such a tight little ball (Yes, I was easily amused, and some would say I still am). These little creatures are a great way for children of any age to explore the world of arthropods. With no fear of being bitten or stung they are a safe choice for hands on learning.

If you have any questions, or pictures of insects you would like to have identified, or maybe you have a suggestion for an upcoming feature insect, please contact me via email: Shelly.cox@mdc.mo.gov

Happy Bugging
(The Bug Lady)

