

Conservation Corner

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This week we'll turn our attention from the night sky, tree line, and pond waters to take a closer look at the insect family Blattidae, the cockroaches. Widely known as the rats of the insect world, cockroaches are perhaps the most disliked of all household insect pests as well as a potential health threat. It's no doubt cockroaches have a bad reputation, even though there are only a few species of the 3,500 found worldwide that are scavengers and disease vectors. In fact most cockroach species are tropical, never enter houses, and help with the decaying process. Some are even quite handsome, including the one our son Neil recently discovered.

Neil and his family had just returned to their home in Laos after spending six weeks on our farm when we received this photo with a note asking if I knew what it was. After a little research, we identified it as *Neostylopyga rhombifolia*, commonly called a Harlequin Cockroach because of its variegated appearance of bright yellow and black. Native to Indo-Malaysia, it has spread to various parts of the world but is not considered a pest with very few reports of them invading homes.

Like many cockroaches, Harlequins are usually found in woodlands under logs or stones, feed mainly at night, have wings but seldom fly, and need heat and high humidity to thrive. Did you know Harlequins can go two weeks without water and up to a month without food, hold their breath for up to 40 minutes, and run up to 3 mph? One of the most beautiful species, Harlequins are popular with people who keep cockroaches as pets.

What first attracted Neil's attention was its ootheca or egg case. Perhaps you're familiar with the egg cases laid by members of the mantis family. Female mantids secrete foam masses containing hundreds of eggs which they attach to twigs where they dry to a tough, paper consistency that lasts throughout the winter. Female cockroaches also develop egg cases. Some species carry its egg case for a few days before leaving it in a suitable area to hatch, while some species carry it on the tip of their abdomens until the nymphs hatch. Cockroaches have an incomplete metamorphic lifestyle, hatching as tan-colored nymphs that with each molt develop more of the adult pattern and color.



Here in Iowa, these flat, oval insects grow from 1/2 to 2 inches long and are brown to black in color. The German cockroach is the most common indoor species and carries its egg cases until they start to hatch. The Brown-Banded cockroach is similar to the German but glues its cases to hidden surfaces. Oriental cockroaches are large, dark, shiny insects that live in basements, crawlspaces, and sewers. The American cockroach is reddish brown in color and is an outdoor species living in wood piles and decaying trees. The wood cockroach is also an outdoor insect and is commonly found throughout Iowa.

Do you have a pet cockroach?