

WILDLIFE OF VICTORIA PARK

by John Serrao

SOUTHERN WALKING STICK

During a recent Nature Walk along a trail in Victoria Gardens' Conservation Area, a participant called our attention to a large insect stretched out on a palmetto leaf. Closer examination revealed that there were actually 3 of them on the frond, and each one had a smaller partner riding on top of it! I picked one up and was immediately sprayed on the hand with a noxious, smelly fluid.

This is the Southern 2-Striped Walking Stick, a stout, 2 1/2-inch long, wingless insect that is unusually abundant this year. People have been seeing them on the outside walls of their houses, in their yards, and crossing roads. And, in every case, there is a smaller male attached to the large female insect, giving it another colloquial

name — Devil Rider. The “devil” part comes from the ability of these insects to accurately spray a fluid, from glands behind the head, more than 12 inches into the face of a bird, mouse, raccoon, or other potential predator. If this chemical gets into a person’s eyes it is not only very irritating and painful, but it can cause temporary blindness! It’s not a good idea to touch or handle one of these otherwise harmless insects.

The Southern Walking Stick comes in 3 different color forms: black with white stripes, brown with yellow stripes, and orange. For most of the summer it lives up in the trees and shrubs consuming leaves. Its excellent camouflage renders it essentially invisible. In autumn, however, they descend to the ground, form mating pairs, and lay eggs in the soil. Sometimes many pairs join together in large aggregations, becoming a very formidable sight to any animal (or person) who has ever experienced their chemical weapon.