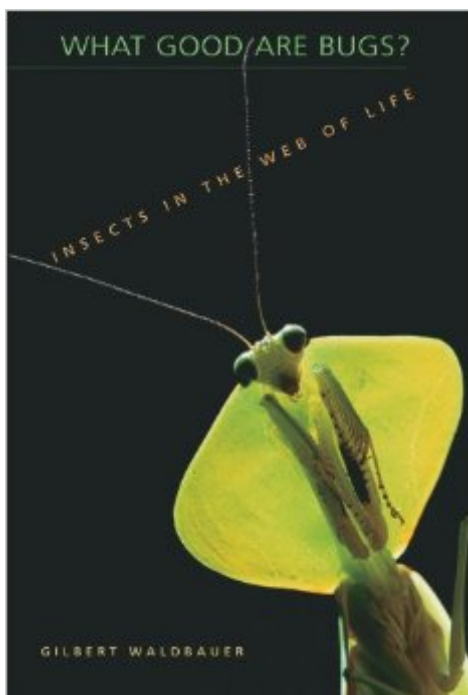


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# What Good Are Bugs?: Insects In The Web Of Life



## Synopsis

We shriek about them, slap and spray them, and generally think of insects (when we think of them at all) as pests. Yet, if all insects, or even a critical few, were to disappear--if there were none to pollinate plants, serve as food for other animals, dispose of dead organisms, and perform other ecologically essential tasks--virtually all the ecosystems on earth, the webs of life, would unravel. This book, the first to catalogue ecologically important insects by their roles, gives us an enlightening look at how insects work in ecosystems--what they do, how they live, and how they make life as we know it possible. In *What Good Are Bugs?* Gilbert Waldbauer combines anecdotes from entomological history with insights into the intimate workings of the natural world, describing the intriguing and sometimes amazing behavior of these tiny creatures. He weaves a colorful, richly textured picture of beneficial insect life on earth, from ants sowing their "hanging gardens" on shrubs and trees to the sacred scarab of ancient Egypt burying balls of cattle dung full of undigested seeds, from the cactus-eating caterpillar (aptly called *Cactoblastis*) controlling the spread of the prickly pear to the prodigious honey bee and the "sanitary officers of the field"--the fly maggots, ants, beetles, and caterpillars that help decompose and recycle dung, carrion, and dead plants. As entertaining as it is informative, this charmingly illustrated volume captures the full sweep of insects' integral place in the web of life.

## Book Information

Paperback: 384 pages

Publisher: Harvard University Press (October 25, 2004)

Language: English

ISBN-10: 0674016327

ISBN-13: 978-0674016323

Product Dimensions: 6.1 x 0.9 x 9.2 inches

Shipping Weight: 1.3 pounds (View shipping rates and policies)

Average Customer Review: 4.6 out of 5 stars [See all reviews](#) (5 customer reviews)

Best Sellers Rank: #1,522,285 in Books (See Top 100 in Books) #30 in [Books > Science & Math > Nature & Ecology > Field Guides > Insects & Spiders](#) #649 in [Books > Science & Math > Biological Sciences > Biology > Entomology](#) #742 in [Books > Science & Math > Biological Sciences > Animals > Insects & Spiders](#)

## Customer Reviews

Of course, we know what bugs are good for, but just in case there is anybody out there who doesn't,

Professor Waldbauer makes an elaborate argument in twelve chapters under four general headings: Helping Plants, Helping Animals, Limiting Population Growth, and Cleaning Up. Waldbauer manages to be fascinating, as indeed, I think an entomologist ought to be, since insects really are something amazing, as well as thorough, but never boring or tedious. He has that rare gift of being able to present the reader with a lot of information and to make it clear, interesting, and a pleasure to read. One is left with the overwhelming conviction that without bugs we humans could not exist, period. Next to microbial life, bugs form the most fundamental life force on this planet, and like the microbes, they will be here long after we are gone. We need to make our peace with them, and join with them in keeping the planet's life in balance. The subtitle, "Insects in the Web of Life," really says what this book is about as well as it can be said in just a few words: all life forms are interconnected and interdependent and part of the larger web of life. It isn't just the pollination of our plants by insects that is irreplaceable, nor their control of one another, nor their policing of the landscape, nor even their position near the base of the entire food chain that serves us, but it is their gigantic presence in nearly all the diverse ecologies of the planet that cannot be replaced. Remove the insects and the entire eco-structure collapses.

We are determined to see moral qualities in nature. We might describe a hero as lionhearted, but a villain as a snake or a rat. Or an insect. Insects are generally regarded as bad creatures. They sting, bite, spread disease, and eat our homes and food. Of course, they are no more bad than lambs are bad. They are simply doing what evolution has equipped them to do. It can be argued that they are not good, too, but in *What Good Are Bugs? Insects in the Web of Life* (Harvard), entomologist Gilbert Waldbauer makes the case that as far as making the natural world go around, insects are very good indeed. In fact, he calculates that only about 1.5% of the known insects do us any harm, and a very much smaller percent of the total insects do so, since we have only identified about a tenth of them all, and are better at identifying the pests. Waldbauer, who is professor emeritus of entomology and in this book reflects on decades of loving interest in his subject, says that without insects "...virtually all the terrestrial ecosystems on earth... would unravel." His book, usefully organized with each chapter about a particular activity that insects perform, makes an entertaining and convincing case. We could not have evolved ourselves without insects, and could not keep living if they were to disappear. It is not surprising that Waldbauer's first chapter is about pollination. Most people know that insects are the pollinators of many flowers and other plants, but people didn't always know this. Pretty flowers were said to be merely a manifestation of God's eagerness to give us pleasure. It was only in 1793 that an observer wrote about flowers, scent, and nectar as a lures

for insects, and the discovery that the plants could not be fertilized without them.

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