

Buzz Off! My Search for Deer Fly Solutions

by Gina Fortunato for *Animal Health Digest*

There is nothing more pleasurable than a cool morning trail ride through the woods, sun streaming through the trees, dew still on the fern leaves and wildlife running around ...until – BUZZ! Pesky deer flies start to attack your horse's neck, face and ears. Then you have an agitated horse throwing their head around ruining the serene environment you hoped for. This happened to me a few days ago, so I set out to learn more about deer flies and seek the best prevention so my Kentucky Mountain horse riding buddy, Blue's Clues, can enjoy the ride as much as I do.

Fun facts about deer flies (Tabanidae):

- Deer flies prefer outdoor environments, are mostly pasture pests and do not frequent barns and paddock areas.
- Deer flies prefer wooded areas, especially near wet soil such as marshes, bogs or streams.
- Since they are attracted to moist areas, deer flies target horses' faces, mouths, ears and eyes and other areas that collect perspiration.
- Deer flies are aggressive biters, particularly in June and July. And sadly, for Blue's Clues, who is all black with one white sock, they prefer dark colors.
- It is estimated that deer flies cost our industry about \$700,000 to \$1 million yearly.



photo by Spencer Hardy: Deerfly species from left to right: Sherman's Deer Fly (*Chrysops shermani*), *Chrysops indus*, Black Deer Fly (*Chrysops niger*) <[Link](#)>

Horse owner hacks:

I find the horse community to be a close-knit group, and members are always willing to share what is on their minds...sometimes even when advice is not needed! Querying horse friends around the U.S. using social media I asked them if they had any favorite hacks for preventing deer fly attacks. Here are three of the top recommendations:

- Lucky Braid shampoo – Several horse owners reported this shampoo also helped with tail rubbing and deterred bugs and flies.
- Dragon Fly clips – Because deer flies are known to avoid dragon flies, clipping a dragon fly in motion on the top of the bridle may scare away deer flies.
- Bug balls – There have been mixed reviews online for bug balls, but a few horse owners say they work well.

One size does not fit all when it comes to horses. Sometimes multiple approaches may work best. In addition to what I'm doing (using a fly mask under the bridle and carrying a horse tail fly whisk, I'm looking forward to trying one (or all) of the above. After all, I want Blue's Clues to have a buzz-free ride as much as I do. Happy trails!

The suggestions in this article are intended to provide information only based on horse owner experience. If you need scientific data on flies, please visit the AAEP website and download their 2024 External Parasite and Vector Control Guidelines. Here is the section specific to flies: <https://aaep.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/03/Flies.pdf>

Sources:

- Illinois Department of Public Health <https://www.idph.state.il.us/envhealth/pcbitingflies.htm>
- Bug Guide <https://bugguide.net/node/view/117>