



Common name

wood tick

Scientific name

Dermacentor andersoni

What's Bugging Wild Critters?

Fact sheet #22:
Wood tick



Significance

Wood ticks cause little or no harm to wildlife. However, they readily attach to humans and most people do not appreciate this! In rare cases, wood ticks can transmit infectious diseases to people.

What? Where? How?

Ticks are related to spiders, but are specially adapted to living on the outside of other species and attaching themselves with special mouthparts to extract blood. Their flat bodies, grasping legs, and hard outer covering make them very difficult to scrape off. See the fact sheet on [winter tick](#) and [rabbit tick](#) for more detailed information regarding ticks.

Transmission Cycle

The wood tick, like its cousin the winter tick, is a hard tick with four life stages; however, it is much less choosy about its preferred habitat. The wood tick is a three-host tick that uses various rodents and rabbits as habitat for larvae and nymphs, whereas adults live on a variety of large mammals. Larvae are most numerous in July, and nymphs occur later in summer. Adults are commonly found in spring when they climb up on grasses and shrubs. From there, they grab onto passing deer, elk, or bighorn sheep.

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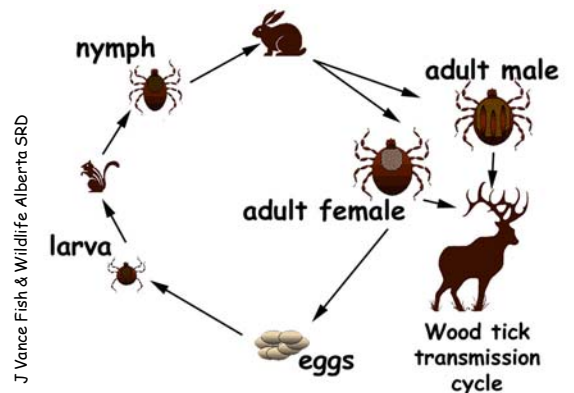


Wood tick

(*Dermacentor andersoni*)

in Alberta

In the relatively cold climate of the foothills and at higher altitudes, the life cycle of wood ticks may take two or even three years to complete.



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Distribution in Alberta

Wood ticks are often seen on vegetation on south-facing slopes in the foothills during the spring. These are "questing" adults that are looking for a large mammal on which to live for a while. Wood ticks are much harder to see when they are on a mammal. Occasionally, people who handle live wildlife see the tiny larvae on deer mice, chipmunks, and squirrels; nymphs on chipmunks and golden-mantled ground squirrels; or adults on mule deer, elk, bighorn sheep, mountain goats, and porcupines.

Importance for Wildlife Management

Wood ticks generally live as benign companions on a wide range of wildlife species and are not a management concern. Rare cases of paralysis of deer have been associated with wood ticks, but no such cases have been reported in Alberta.

Wood tick in Alberta

(*Dermacentor andersoni*)

Public Significance

As a rule, wood ticks in Alberta do not pose a health risk for humans, though they can be irritating and disconcerting if you are the person with a tick! However, the species can transmit Rocky Mountain spotted fever, tularaemia, and Colorado tick fever to humans. Although these diseases are extremely rare in Alberta, anyone who is bitten by a tick and then experiences fever, headaches, abdominal pain, a rash, nausea, or vomiting should consult a physician and make him/her aware of the tick bite. There are cases of paralysis in cattle, horses, and dogs that resulted from bites by wood ticks but, again, these situations have not been reported in Alberta. Note that tick paralysis in humans, which occurs elsewhere in North America, does NOT involve wood ticks. Adult wood ticks occasionally use livestock and pets as a place to live. On rare occasions, these ticks can transmit anaplasmosis, but this is not known to occur in Alberta.

Prevention/Control

Long sleeves, closed shoes, and long pants tucked into your socks will help prevent ticks from attaching to humans. Insect repellents that contain DEET also are effective. In areas where wood ticks occur frequently (foothills and mountains), dogs and people should be checked for ticks after a day in the bush. If you find a tick, do NOT remove it by squeezing the back end and pulling. On the rare chance that a tick contains some infectious organism, squeezing may actually force the agent through the mouthparts and into the dog or person. Similarly, do NOT try to pull the tick off quickly. This usually results in leaving the mouthparts buried in the skin. For effective removal of attached ticks, gently grasp the tick with tweezers at the front end of the mouthparts and as close to the skin as possible. Slowly pull up and away from the skin, thus giving time for the tick to remove its mouthparts from the skin. Specific agricultural products that discourage ticks from biting livestock are available.

Summary

By far the majority of ticks and tick species in Alberta pose no threat or concern to wildlife or human health. The wood tick is capable of transmitting rare infectious diseases to humans or livestock; however, this is extremely unusual in Alberta. Similarly, the bite of a wood tick may cause paralysis in cattle, horses and dogs, but if this occurs at all in Alberta, it has not been reported.

Additional Information

Parasitic Diseases of Wild Mammals, Second Edition. Edited by William M. Samuel, Margo J. Pybus and A. Alan Kocan. 2001. Chapter 4 - Ticks.

Saskatchewan Agriculture, Food and Rural Revitalization: <http://www.agr.gov.sk.ca/apps/insectPest/pests/rocktick.asp>

Canadian Cooperative Wildlife Health Centre: http://wildlife1.usask.ca/ccwhc2003/wildlife_health_topics.php?&width=1280&height=1024#W

British Columbia Ministry of Agriculture, Food and Fisheries: <http://www.agf.gov.bc.ca/cropprot/ticksbc.htm>

Agriculture and Agri-Food Canada: <http://collections.ic.gc.ca/agrican/pubweb/hs240028.asp>

Innovation Alberta: <http://www.innovationalberta.com/article.php?articleid=159>

Merck Veterinary Manual - Online: <http://www.merckvetmanual.com/mvm/index.jsp?cfile=htm/bc/72104.htm&word=demacentor%2candersoni>

For more information on wildlife diseases in Alberta: <http://www3.gov.ab.ca/srd/fw/diseases/index.html>