

Prehistoric 'insects' star in this year's Insect Fear Film Festival



Photo by
Nils Cordes

Entomology graduate student Nils Cordes' design entry for the T-shirt contest of the Insect Fear Film Festival.

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CHAMPAIGN, Ill. — After millions of years encased in the rock of a volcano outside Mexico City, the giant scorpions are riled and ready to rumble. So too are the vicious, multi-legged marine monsters, called trilobites, which assault the crew of an Antarctic research station after they are freed from the ice. These are the rampaging stars of this year's Insect Fear Film Festival.



A petting zoo of insects is enjoyed by festival-goers of all ages. | Photo by Jo-Anne Holley

Never mind that scorpions and trilobites are not insects, said [entomology](#) professor and department head May Berenbaum, who founded the festival in 1984. “The scientists in the movies refer to them as insects, so we figure they're fair game,” she said.

Critter classification is not all that the movies, “The Black Scorpion” (1957) and “Ice Crawlers,” also known as “Deep Freeze” (2003), get wrong. Trilobites are prehistoric and, as far as anyone knows, safely extinct marine creatures that lived more than 250 million years ago. In their heyday they were bottom-feeders, eating plankton and debris and perhaps also feeding on worms. Most of them were small – an inch to a few inches long, although some fossils are significantly bigger. But in “Ice Crawlers” the trilobites scurry around like giant cockroaches, hiding under beds and jumping on people and somehow making them bleed, Berenbaum said.

“The trilobites in the movie are bigger than Rottweilers, bloodthirsty and perfectly happy on dry ground,” she said. “But there's no indication in the fossil record that they were ever able to survive out of the water, much less fling themselves through the air.”

Trilobites, scorpions and insects are all arthropods: invertebrates with a hard shell and jointed appendages. “But an insect is as different from a spider or a scorpion or a trilobite as a mammal is from a bird or a reptile,” Berenbaum said.

In “The Black Scorpion,” the scorpions are not just big – they're colossal: “big enough to toss trains around like toys,” Berenbaum said.

Scorpions are arachnids, more closely related to spiders, ticks and mites than to insects. And while some

prehistoric and now extinct “sea scorpions,” which are not true scorpions, grew as large as 8 feet in length, true scorpions are small, the largest about 7 inches long.

The giant scorpions in the movie are scariest from a distance, when they snatch people and curl their stingers around to inject them with venom, Berenbaum said. The scorpions make “a shrill piping sound,” she said. And in close-ups, they drool.

“The face doesn’t look particularly scary,” Berenbaum said. “It has big eyes with whites and pupils. Arachnids don’t have eyes like that. Nor do they drool, nor do they make strange loud sounds. It’s not a good idea if you’re a predator to be screaming as you stalk your prey because it’s kind of a dead giveaway.”

The festival will begin at 6 p.m. on Feb. 27 (Saturday) at Foellinger Auditorium, 709 S. Mathews Ave., Urbana. Early activities include an insect petting zoo, with living and fossil insects, as well as a “living fossil:” a horseshoe crab. This marine animal is a prehistoric creature, having changed little in more than 440 million years. It is more closely related to arachnids than to crabs, which (along with lobsters, shrimp, crayfish, krill and barnacles) belong to a different group of arthropods: the crustaceans.

The petting zoo also will offer Bugscope (courtesy of the U. of I. Beckman Institute’s Imaging Technology Center), which will provide a peek through a scanning electron microscope for an “up close and personal look at various insects,” Berenbaum said. T-shirts from 26 of the 27 years of the festival will be on sale.

Opening remarks will begin at 7 p.m., with an announcement of the winner of the Prehistoric Insects art contest. A variety of movie trailers and clips from TV shows featuring prehistoric insects will begin at 7:30. “Black Scorpion” will begin at 7:40, “Ice Crawlers” at 9:15.

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