

# FEATURES

## Blood-sucking parasites — coming soon to a bed near you?

*Long associated with impoverished dwellings and fleabag motels, bedbug infestations are increasingly being found in even the wealthiest areas*

BY JANE E. BRODY  
NY TIMES NEWS SERVICE, NEW YORK

Throughout my early childhood I was tucked into bed with a gentle admonition: “Good night, sleep tight. Don’t let the bedbugs bite.” Not that my parents or I had ever seen a bedbug or known anyone bitten by one.

But these days this old saying has resonance for many more people than in years past, including those who sleep in expensive homes and four-star hotels. Last month, a family living in a US\$3 million private house in Brooklyn, New York, discarded rooms’ worth of furniture, the cushions carefully slashed and notes attached saying the pieces had bedbugs and were not safe to take.

Had this been the case 40-odd years ago, when I became a New York homeowner, I might have had a hard time furnishing my rooms; most were decorated with foundlings, including cushioned chairs. In those days, street scavengers like me had little reason to worry about bedbugs.

But the bedbug problem has become so widespread in 21st-century America that the *Journal of the American Medical Association* published a clinical review in April, *Bed Bugs and Clinical Consequences of Their Bites*, by Jerome Goddard, a medical entomologist at Mississippi State University, and Richard deShazo, an allergist at the University of Mississippi Medical Center.

### A GROWING PROBLEM

Although this blood-sucking parasite has been around for thousands of years, it was mainly associated with impoverished dwellings and fleabag motels. Now, as the authors pointed out, “international travel, immigration, changes in pest control practices, and insecticide resistance” have ganged up to create “a resurgence in developed countries,” including the US.

“Bed bug infestations have been reported increasingly in homes, apartments, hotel rooms, hospitals and dormitories in the US since 1980,” they wrote. Reported infestations in San Francisco doubled from 2004 to 2006; telephone complaints in Toronto rose 100 percent in six months during 2002; and the number of bedbug samples sent to authorities in Australia was 400 percent higher from 2001 to 2004, compared with the previous three years.

The critters can move easily from apartment to apartment through cracks in walls and floors. In the last fiscal year in New York City, a densely populated international destination with many people living in multifamily dwellings, bedbug complaints to the city’s Department of Housing Preservation and Development rose to 8,840, nearly 2,000 more than in the previous fiscal year. And chances are most residents of infested households, especially those in single-family dwellings, co-ops and condominiums, never complained to this agency.

There is some good news about bedbugs. The journal authors reported that although the insects have been blamed for transmitting more than 40 human diseases, “there is little evidence that such transmission has ever occurred.”

The bad news is that even if bedbugs don’t spread hepatitis or AIDS, they can engender feelings of shame and disgust, and they are difficult and often costly to eliminate.

### KNOW THE ENEMY

Adult bedbugs are easy to see, but only if you look at the right time — during the night on or near a human target. They do most of their feeding around 4am.

The insects resemble ticks. Before a blood meal they are about 1cm long, reddish brown, with a long nose tucked under a pyramid-shaped head and chest. After feeding, they may grow to more than 1.3cm. But you are more likely to see their remains in the morning: tiny black specks of excrement or perhaps a blood stain on the sheet if the sleeper happened to land on a well-fed bug.



ILLUSTRATION BY NY TIMES NEWS SERVICE

During the day, bedbugs remain in the dark, hidden in mattress cords, cracks and crevices of box springs or seams of upholstered furniture, in the backs of headboards or joints of wooden bed frames, under loosened wallpaper, or even behind picture frames over a bed — but almost always near where people spend the night.

Most people who are bitten by bedbugs do not react. Of the 30 percent or so who do, many mistake the small, pink, itchy bumps for mosquito bites, although people may become more suspicious and more sensitive with repeated bites.

People who are highly sensitive react with intense itching that prompts scratching and can lead to infections. One Brooklyn family did not know they were sharing quarters with bedbugs until a sensitive relative visited and woke in the morning with very itchy bites.

Still others may experience more extreme reactions, including asthma, generalized hives, and even a life-threatening allergy (anaphylaxis) that requires emergency treatment with epinephrine.

But most bedbug lesions can be treated with an anti-itch product like calamine lotion or a topical or oral corticosteroid and antihistamine. If bites become infected, a topical or oral antibiotic may be needed.

### PREVENTION AND ELIMINATION

There is no effective repellent against bedbugs, so avoidance is the best protection. Resist the temptation to pick up discarded mattresses, sofas, cushioned chairs and similar furnishings that could harbor the bugs. If you can’t pass up clothes left out for the taking, carry them away in a plastic bag and then either wash them as soon as possible in very hot water, place them in a hot dryer or have them dry-cleaned.

The journal authors advise that “items purchased at garage sales and resale shops, especially mattresses, box springs and bedding, be carefully inspected for bed bugs before they are brought into homes.”

It also helps to rid the house of clutter that can provide hiding places for the bugs. When traveling, check the bed for evidence of bugs before you get in. And when you return home, check your luggage for bugs that may have come along.

Home remedies — usually ineffective — are legion. One family tried standing the legs of their beds in dishes of mineral oil, which stained the floor but did not deter the bugs. The family ended up hiring a professional exterminator, which is often a more cost-effective strategy than do-it-yourself methods. After repeated treatments to the family’s apartment and the neighbors’, the exterminator now does routine maintenance.

Pesticide sprays are not recommended for use on bedding. More effective, though no bargain, is to encase the mattress and box spring in covers like those used against dust mite allergy.

Other remedies include high-suction vacuuming or heat or steam treatments of infested furniture, also best done by licensed professionals. If space and time are available, furniture suspected to harbor bedbugs can be placed in the sun for several days or out in the winter cold for about two weeks. The bugs can survive indoors for a long time without feeding, but when they are exposed to temperature extremes outside and have no food source, they die off or disappear.

### [ MEDIA ]

## BBC online archive will reveal a host of hidden treasures

*Ambitious plans to digitize the records of the UK’s national public broadcaster are scheduled for completion in 2022 — a century after the archive began*

BY JEMIMA KISS  
THE GUARDIAN, LONDON

The BBC’s Written Archive Center at Caversham, Berkshire, overflows with fascinating handwritten notes — from figures as diverse as Puccini and the Rolling Stones. One from the post-punk band Yeah Yeah Noh in 1986 begs “Uncle John” Peel to please wear their T-shirt on Top of the Pops; another by the producer Dale Griffin describes UB40’s 1982 session as great, despite “flatulence and pestilence” threatening to wreck the recording.

The BBC’s archive project — which aims to make the resource more accessible and easier to understand, by putting its contents online — has been paid little attention. And while most interest has, perhaps understandably, focused on the TV and radio archives at Windmill Road in Brentford, Greater London, which account for nearly 1 million hours of programming, there are 25 more archives dating back to 1922, when the British Broadcasting Company was first established. They include the world’s largest collection of sheet music, almost

everything ever recorded on gramophone, a vast news archive, 10m stills and a written archive that extends 7.2km.

Since his appointment six months ago, the BBC’s controller of archive development, Tony Ageh, has been working with the archive director, Roly Keating, to put the corporation’s plans into practice. Their ambitious scheme represents the most powerful and culturally significant project ever attempted by the BBC, they believe.

### ALL THE NEWS THAT’S FIT TO ARCHIVE

“It’s rather like building the pyramids, because the people who are starting this will never see it completed,” Ageh says. “What we have is an unprecedented record of the cultural, historical and social life of a nation and of large parts of the world for more than half a century.” The written archive has been fastidiously curated by Jacque Kavanagh for nearly 35 years. An archive serves as “the corporate memory” of the organization, she explains

— meaning that its bread and butter role is contractual history, and checking for legal or editorial precedent.

The written archives are comprehensive until the 1960s, when the phone replaced written notes for much program planning. Microfilm records were used until the 1990s, and now program details are logged digitally. The breadth and scale of the corporation mean these archives are packed with production notes, program correspondence and contracts relating to just about anyone who has worked for the BBC since 1922. If you can think of a name, it will probably be there.

There is a 1963 handwritten letter from Brian Jones of the Rolling Stones to the music department, in which he applies for an audition, describing the band’s “authentic Chicago rhythm and blues music” inspired by Howling Wolf, Muddy Waters and Bo Diddley.

Another file shows the influential BBC producer Leslie Perowne accepting Roy Plomley’s 1941 pitch for *Desert Island Discs*

with glee, wondering why nobody had thought of “such an obvious and excellent idea” before.

The collection of more than 100,000 music manuscripts includes a copy of *La Bohème* signed by Giacomo Puccini for Percy Pitt, the first musical director of the BBC, in 1906. And there are the original scores for Ronnie Hazlehurst’s *Two Romnies* theme, *Dad’s Army* and *Porridge*, alongside furiously reworked lyrics for *Blackadder’s* wry opening sequence.

### ‘A MIRROR TO SOCIETY’

Most recently, Kavanagh has been pulling out files on Guy Burgess, the infamous double agent who began his career as a journalist for the BBC and the *Times*. “The archives are a fabulous source for socio-political history,” she says. “They hold up a mirror to society and reflect back the decisions that were made at the time and what happened behind the scenes.”

In December 1935, the historian George Trevelyan wrote to Cecil Graves — then program

controller — supporting a job application by Burgess. “He was in the running for a fellowship in history, but decided that his bent was for the great world — politics, journalism. He is a first rate man, and has passed through the communist measles that so many of our clever young men go through, and is well out of it. I think he would prove a great addition to your staff ...”

So where does the BBC start? The deadline for digitizing those parts of the archive deemed suitable has been set for 2022, 100 years after the archive began.

The corporation has started to make some headway, by establishing partnerships with other cultural organizations to address shared problems. The first such project to be confirmed is one with the British Film Institute that will focus on TV, radio and film assets. “We’ve both got the same problems to solve, whether that’s programs on George Orwell, *Men Behaving Badly* or Morecombe and Wise, but we can coordinate on structure, on hardware and on

methods and models of discovery of content,” says Ageh.

The kernel of the BBC Archive is already online at [bbc.co.uk/archive](http://bbc.co.uk/archive), where the first few collections are being presented to the public. Further development may take the form of crowdsourcing, Ageh says, perhaps granting access to parts of the archive to colleges or specialist groups, such as the Sherlock Holmes Society. Such organizations could help develop and validate the content. He has already asked staff across the corporation’s editorial divisions to prioritize content according to its historical and cultural relevance, and also to its long-term mainstream appeal.

### PERSONAL HISTORIES

There could be a million stories waiting to be told in the BBC Archive. Ageh himself may be a good indication of the hidden delights in store for people across the country. He says that their natural instinct, after looking up favorite TV shows or personalities, is to look at the regional news

archive of the time to retrace events from childhood — friends, schools or the big events of the day. Much of Ageh’s enthusiasm comes from his own experience of tracing correspondence between the BBC and his estranged father, who had worked briefly as a correspondent in Nigeria.

“I’d been going on for years about how the archives contain the personal histories of tens of thousands of people, but I never thought I’d be one of them,” he says. “The fact that I found out more about my father from the BBC’s archive than I had known in the 40-odd years up to then was stunning. More stunning still is the possibility that we may still have programs featuring him, his work or simply his voice. The idea of being able to give that to my children — his grandchildren — is miraculous.”

Perhaps the best way to get the archive online would be to leave a canister of documents outside every door in the country, Ageh jokes. With the scale of the mission ahead, that might not be such a bad idea.