We're going on a bug hunt! Our search for the creepiest of crawlies...

Julia Molony

At five years old, my son can count the summers he has experienced on one hand. But already, he has a bank of summer memories; filled with the sights, sounds and smells unique to the warmest months of the year.

Summer means late nights and long days. It means swimming and outdoor dining. It means ice cream and raspberries and tomatoes, freshly picked from his grandparents' garden. And summer, of course, is synonymous with bugs.

It's not that we don't see insects the rest of the year. There are slugs and snails and woodlice and worms to be found in every season near our house, so long as there's no frost. But it's not until around mid-May that the micropolis in our little garden in south-west France bursts dramatically into life. Suddenly the place is teeming with creatures – ladybirds, spiders and bees. Grasshoppers springing out of the long grass when he walks through it in bare feet.

Returning to Ireland in late summer represents a whole new opportunity for discovery. Bug life in Ireland seems gentler, friendlier, compared to the giant hornets and biting spiders and incessant mosquitos we face here.

By August in France, the grass is brown and parched. By contrast, in my father's suburban garden in Dublin, damp mossy spots near rocks and around trees are teeming with juicy earthworms, snails and slugs.

It's not hard to understand my son's wonder and fascination with this rich miniature world. All of life's big themes can be found there: chaos and order, mortality and abundance, beauty and the macabre.

From the earliest ages, children seem exquisitely sensible to the range of affective experience that can be drawn from observing the insect world – my son is equally captivated by the elegant poetry of a marbled white butterfly on the wing, as he is by the gruesome spectacle of a troupe of carpenter ants working together to drag away a half-squashed earthworm for food. He knows too well the agony of a honeybee sting. And understands with childish solemnity that though he suffers from the sting, the bee pays for his pain with its life.

Children are born natural scientists. Which is why a bug hunt makes a great family activity, whether in the garden, on a country walk or during a day trip to the beach, lake or stream. Searching for creepy crawlies gets kids out into the fresh air, away from their screens. It encourages concentration and observational skills. These days my son is regularly joined on his bug hunts by his 20-month-old sister. And sometimes by his parents as well. Watching him approaching spiders and scuttling beetles and slimy snails with un-squeamish curiosity and careful hands never fails to make me, someone easily creeped out by creatures with six or eight legs, feel inexplicably proud.



Close encounter: Julia's son Roman gently introduces himself to the local bugs

Why not...

Take a break from mowing and weeding the lawn. That way you can encourage plants like clover and dandelions to thrive. And the butterflies and bees will thank you for it.

Nessa Darcy describes herself as a "creative entomologist". A Dublin-based ecologist, conservation scientist and educator, she is passionate about all things creepy and crawly. She also works in schools promoting insects, the "essential and under-appreciated heroes of our natural heritage".

First off, she encourages any would-be bug hunters to foster biodiversity in their garden. If you take a break from mowing and weeding your lawn, allowing plants like clovers and dandelions to thrive, they will, she says, "attract pollinators such as bumble bees and hoverflies.

She also recommends making a simple hoverfly lagoon. "Cut the bottom off a plastic milk bottle, fill it with water and dead plant material and when that goes stagnant you'll get little microscopic creatures in it," she says. "There are types of hoverflies whose larvae will live underwater and eat those. They're called rat-tailed maggots because they have a long tube that reaches up through the water to get air. And they're really cool. They were one of my favourite things to play with when I was a kid."

Also commonly found in gardens are the common woodlouse and the earwig, (which, she assures, does not go inside your ears). "It actually takes care of its young until they are big enough to fend for themselves," she exmplains. Then there's the "cabbage white butterfly caterpillar – and the cool parasitoid wasps that eat them from the inside!"

Look out too for "ladybirds with various numbers of spots – people often think the spots show what age the ladybird is, but it's actually that different species have different numbers of spots".

You'll likely also find "aphids and the ants who 'herd' them and collect their honeydew, which is like sugary poop".

Farther afield, "woodland edges and hedgerows are a really nice place to find insects", says Nessa. "Look out for red soldier beetles [Rhagonycha fulva], mainly found on hogweed. Its larvae eat slugs and snails and the adults eat aphids, so also a great insect to have around crop fields and gardens.

"A nice hedgerow spider to hunt is the cucumber spider – its abdomen is light green with a little pink/red spot on its bum." If you're really lucky, you might come across the dramatic-looking Rhino beetle, which lives in dead wood.

"One of my favourite ladybirds," she says, "is the 22 spot ladybird [below]. It's this bright banana yellow, and lives in damper areas and eats mildew off leaves. Sometimes you see them in great numbers in hedgerows, all over the leaves."

To get up close to the ultimate crowd pleaser, the butterfly, Nessa advises spending some time hanging around clumps of nettles.

"The nettle supports five different butterfly species in Ireland," she explains. "The peacock, red admiral, small tortoiseshell, the comma and the painted lady."



A bug's life: Julia's son Roman (5) and daughter Margot (20 months) go in search of interesting insects

