

Los Angeles Times CALENDAR weekend

WITH THE KIDS

Oh, that's just my pal Spike

Many kids prefer creepy-crawlies as pets. The Natural History Museum's Bug Fair is for them.

By Brenda Rees
Special to The Times

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Some 10-year-old girls beg their parents for new clothes, the latest Hilary Duff album or maybe even a cellphone. Not Evy Roth.

"What I really want is a trapdoor spider," says the Panorama City girl. "I think they are so cool. I really do."

Don't get Evy started on other bugs she finds cuddly. The list is endless. "Hissing cockroaches are also very nice to you," she says. "Male carpenter bees are cute and fuzzy, and I really like orchid mantids too."

Evy is one of many kids who don't recoil from the sight of an insect scurrying across the floor. These bug lovers can't wait to get their hands on the right addition to their ever-growing and ever-changing bug collections.

In her family's townhouse, Evy has amassed quite an insect zoo, including a pair of tomato worms, a giant black African millipede named Chocolate and about 50 furry caterpillars that will soon metamorphose into painted lady butterflies.

One of her favorite "pets" is Widow, a gigantic black widow spider that enjoys a steady diet of crickets. "She's not gruesome at all," says Roth. "She's so cute."

Roth will be showing off some of her collection this weekend at the Natural History Museum of Los Angeles County's annual Bug Fair. She'll be sitting in the booth with adult friend Steve Kutcher, the movie bug wrangler who also regularly lectures on the benefits of insects through school presentations, workshops and public demonstrations.

Kutcher is pleased to have children share his enthusiasm for bug collecting. "I once had a dad call wanting to buy some insects from me because his daughter had a school project," says the spider-supplier for "Spider-Man."

As the two talked, the dad recalled fond memories of collecting bugs as a kid. Kutcher says the dad realized that "he needed to share that experience with his daughter. It was too important to pass by."

Indeed, bug collecting for most kids is a hands-on endeavor that can spread from forays in backyards and parks to weekend camping expeditions. Insect collections can be simple and handmade or complex with a professional approach.

For example, Eric Mathison, 15, of San Pedro has collected and expertly prepared more than 1,000 specimens. Storing his collection in glass display cases stacked in his room and in a section of the family kitchen, Eric has amassed a wide variety of insects that he mostly collected himself. While Eric has some live creatures, he prefers his "dry" collection because it allows him to study the insects close up and in a more scientific way.

"It's interesting to see the different parts [of an insect] and how they work together" says Eric, who cross-references his findings with various entomology books he has scattered around the house. "One day I hope to maybe discover and describe a new species."

For seven years, Eric has been a member of the Clovers 4H Entomology Club, a group for kids that features monthly meetings, speakers and projects. The organization, which is sponsoring a booth at this year's Bug Fair, arranges bug-collecting overnight camping trips.

During these wilderness outings, Eric has struck upon a favorite method for attracting night-flying bugs. He shines a black light onto a white sheet and when the light-loving bugs come fluttering and flirting, Mathison simply picks the insects off the sheet.

That raises a question: As kids wrangle more and more bugs for their collections, how do parents — who may not be as bug-happy as their children — cope?

"I'm arachnophobic and almost died from a black widow bite on the head when I was 3 years old," says Maria Diaz of Pasadena, whose 10-year-old son Sebastian has a "serious love of bugs."

"This has to be nature's idea of a practical joke," Diaz says with a laugh. "We have all sorts of bugs in our house at all times."

Indeed, Sebastian has hung T-shirts around the house filled with sleeping cocoons, raised countless generations of insects and delighted schoolmates and neighbors with his "pet" collection and bug shows of his own.

"He trains praying mantis," says Diaz. "They jump back and forth from his fingers, wave to an audience and do other tricks. It's amazing."

Even though she'll probably never see them as cute, Diaz acknowledges that she has come to terms with bugs. "I have to support Sebastian with his interests and we have to trust each other," she says.

Besides, continues Diaz, Sebastian has learned much about nature, reproduction and respect for life from bugs. "They are good teachers, and I've learned that very few bugs can actually hurt you," she says, and then pauses. "But they still creep me out."

Brenda Rees can be reached at weekend@latimes.com.

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19th Annual Bug Fair

Where: Natural History Museum, 900 Exposition Blvd., L.A.

When: 10 a.m. to 5 p.m. Saturday and Sunday

Price: Free with museum admission: \$9 adults, \$6.50 kids ages 5 to 12.

Info: (213) 763-DINO or www.nhm.org.