

AUGUST 29, 1985

Summer rains have hatched off a big crop of mosquitoes at the ranch. We are now 20 miles from a running stream, so we usually don't have gnats or mosquitoes for more than a couple of hours after a thunderstorm. Also, we are a full scale organic ranch operation now and don't buy any type of herbicide or insecticide.

After fat cattle bottomed at four-bits on the plains a few weeks ago we switched over to a natural control program and dropped every means of fly and weed control except hand held fly swatters and garden hoes. Under the pressure of such an absolute market disaster, I decided that it would be more dignified to cut my expenses out here on the open range than it would to have the decision made for me in the stuffy confines of a marble adorned bank.

So without any chemicals, I had to relearn how hard it is to balance nature even on a small scale around the ranch house. First I tried letting my lawn and flower beds dry up to drive the mosquitoes down to the water tank. But all that accomplished was to drive the mosquitoes' number one enemy, the ground toads, back into hibernation.

Before I stopped watering, the toads hadn't been doing their part. A Shortgrass toad frog spends so much time underground avoiding our dry spells that when he does resurface, he's so nearsighted that a mosquito has to land on his tongue to be captured.

Too, after a toad passes into a yearling, and sheds the baby skin around his eyelids, he won't do much except blink his eyes, croak a little, and occasionally make a half hearted hop at a sow bug. Young toads are by far the best killers of all the age groups. In the spring they wander off on love making trips, but they are good summer time bug eaters.

Like any new project I've ever started, I took after organic ranching like I was a front row member of the Sierra Club. I wasn't even going to take my naps by an electric fan. The theory is that if you'll sleep at room temperature, you'll awaken before you oversleep, thanks to the heat.

Outside temperatures were running 95 degrees in the shade. At pillow level, I was recording anywhere from an 84 to 92 on most afternoons. I tested the method on imitation leather recliners, jungle hammocks, bed rolls on steel cots, and two different living room couches.

I couldn't stand the heat. My eyes became bloodshot from daytime insomnia and my body was wrecked by dehydration and a type of solar nightmares that develop from afternoon fevers. Needless to add, I became impatient and short tempered. I went through periods of denial that I needed sleep and on occasions drowsed off at the wheel of my pickup. To get back on schedule, I had to use the fan at 15-minute-intervals to keep from having a chill.

The mosquitoes have caught on that we are defenseless. They perch in the trees in the front yard and clean their beaks by drawing them underneath their wings. At dusk I hear them tuning their bloody hum; by nightfall, they begin to strike the window screens looking for a broken place. Yesterday at nap time they stalled out the electric fan.

Like the toads, mosquitoes can't handle Shortgrass Country weather. They have me outnumbered now, but it'll be a different story once frost hits.