



## Wandering the Woods with Matt

Gnat ogre  
(*Holcocephala*  
*sp.*)

with insect prey

Observed early  
August

at Eldred  
Beagle Club  
(PHLT  
Conservation  
Easement)

Gnat Ogres – a great name for a little sucker

I've got to hand it to whoever came up with the common name "gnat ogre" to describe these little flies. Often overlooked (I first noticed them at my parents house last summer), these little flies perch on vegetation in grassy areas and are voracious predators, making flying forays to catch gnats and other small flying insects. So to us, they are nearly invisible, but to gnats – terrifying ogres!

This photo shows the key characters of the dipteran order. Unlike any other insect order, dipterans (commonly known as flies) have only one pair of wings. [Di - two; ptera - wings]. The 2<sup>nd</sup> pair of wings has been reduced to a peg-like appendage with a ball on the end of it. These appendages are called halteres and are thought to be used smooth out the flies' flight, which would otherwise be choppy with just one pair of wings. The halteres are visible in the photo as the yellowish peg parallel to the fly's abdomen. The winged are held straight and are nearly invisible in this photo. Two other key characters distinguish flies: enormous compound eyes, and short antennae. Flies can be brightly colored (indeed, some are bee mimics), but they will always have one pair of wings, large eyes, and short antennae.

Gnat ogres are members of robber flies (*asilidae*, a family of predatory dipterans (flies)). The eyes are widely-spaced, giving the flies an odd look. No other genus in the entire order of flies has this eye arrangement.

About 40 species in the genus have been described, with the greatest diversity in South America. Three species occur throughout our region, but they are only distinguishable by experts.

