



Encyclopedia of Life

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Head Lice Podcast and Scientist Interview

Pediculus humanus capitis

This podcast is guaranteed to make your scalp crawl—but don't worry, it's most likely all in your head, and not on it.

Transcript

Ari: From the Encyclopedia of Life, this is One Species at a Time. I'm Ari Daniel Shapiro. This is a story about the little things that make the big trouble in our lives. Richard Pollack is an entomologist. He's studied insects for over three decades, including 22 years at the Harvard School of Public Health.

Pollack: I just found it more interesting to work with things that find me attractive – lice, bedbugs, ticks and so forth. Things that tend to salivate when they get close to us.

Ari: But Pollack's also the last resort – the guy people turn to when they've run out of other options.

Pollack: I'm probably 5 percent entomologist and 95 percent therapist.

Ari: People don't like the idea of insect infestations. They're looking for reassurance, and often Pollack is the one to give it. They track him down via his website.

Pollack: All right, so in this file cabinet here – this disheveled cabinet – this represents just the last month or two or so of specimens sent in for evaluation.

Ari: The specimens are things that people – regular, everyday people – believe to be bugs, and Pollack's self-appointed job is to identify the objects for these strangers. Usually, it's dander or a mass of carpet fibers. Occasionally, there's a bug, but it's often harmless. Over the years, Pollack's accumulated letters and emails from all over the world.

Pollack: I have thousands and thousands and thousands.

Ari: And Pollack has replied to every single one. Take his inbox folder entitled “head lice.” Scientific name *Pediculus humanus capitis*. It contains 8,233 messages alone.

Pollack: I’m writing to you out of sheer desperation since I obviously have the type of lice that is resistant to everything, exclamation point. We have fought these “vermin.” There are quotes. I’ve tried home remedies such as vinegar, Lindane shampoo, olive oil, RID furniture spray, ParaSpray, a French treatment for lice. I seriously contemplate shaving my head. Thank you. Signed, Desperate.

Ari: Some of these individuals suffer from a kind of psychosis called delusional parasitosis. They believe they’ve become infested with parasites. It can lead to social paralysis and spending vast sums on chemicals aimed at eradicating pests that don’t exist.

Weigel: I thought I had lice and just couldn’t get rid of them for a long time, because I would feel them. I’d feel them crawling all around my hair. I’d feel them on me.

Ari: Rebecca Weigel lives in Brockton, Massachusetts. She worried nonstop about lice for over a year. She said that sending Pollack samples became something of an addiction for her.

Weigel: As time went on, he would be like, go relax with your kids, go have fun. He was always very, like, reassuring.

Ari: Were you surprised?

Weigel: I was surprised. You know, one time I read it, and it was so thoughtful. And, you know, I was just crying at the end because he sees how much it’s, like, destroying my life. It’s nice to know somebody is rooting you on.

Pollack: From a public health perspective, if I can prevent somebody from doing something terribly unwise, I will.

Ari: All of Pollack’s pen pals – including Rebecca Weigel – stem from a finding he made years ago. Back in the early ’90s, Pollack needed head lice to study in his lab. So he and his colleagues went louse hunting at schools around the country.

Pollack: We received many, many reports that head lice were readily shared child to child, making these leaps in a single bound from one head to another. And the picture they painted was that I should maybe wear hip boots and bring buckets, that the lice were so abundant.

Ari: But they weren’t. It turned out these head lice epicenters were no such thing. Often, Pollack couldn’t turn up a single louse.

Pollack: Yeah. Actually, some of them - it was like fishing stories. You should've been here yesterday, or you should've been here last week.

Ari: It was this finding, that school officials routinely over-exaggerate the prevalence of head lice, that threw Pollack center stage. Schools called him up for advice, and parents phoned him. He put together a website, and that just attracted more attention, which is how he's ended up with cabinets packed with papers and a computer stuffed with email from people he's never met. Pollack recently left his position at Harvard to open his own business. He consults with companies about suspected infestations. And, of course, he continues to identify the countless insects - both real and imagined - that people send him.

Pollack: Oh, isn't nice? You've got friends, not only big two-legged ones, but little six-legged ones as well.

Ari: Our series, One Species at a Time, is produced by Atlantic Public Media in Woods Hole, Massachusetts. I'm Ari Daniel Shapiro.

Meet the Scientist

Meet entomologist Richard Pollack who was featured in the Lice podcast:



Where do you work?

Well, that all depends on the day of the week and time of day. Here's the short list:

President & Chief Scientific Officer, IdentifyUS LLC.

Visiting Researcher, Boston University

Instructor, Harvard School of Public Health

Adjunct Assistant Professor, Cummings School of Veterinary Medicine, Tufts University

Commissioner, Norfolk County Mosquito Control District, Commission Chair

Mosquito Advisory Group, Massachusetts Dept. of Agricultural Resources

What do you study?

As a public health entomologist, I explore the ecology, epidemiology, physiology and behavior of those insects and ticks that find us attractive.

What are three titles you would give yourself?

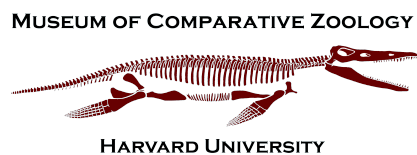
Entomologist, dead-pan stand up comic, realist.

What do you like to do when you are not working?

When not in the lab, you'll find me in the field (or in painfully maddening never-ending bureaucratic meetings).

What do you like most about science?

What I do is intellectually stimulating. That's good, because the financial rewards seem inversely proportional to the cerebral ones. Furthermore, I can go anywhere in the world and find my little friends - much to the annoyance of family members accompanying me.



The One Species at a Time podcast series is supported by the Harvard Museum of Comparative Zoology.