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Stowaways That Are Disgusting, Even Deadly

By CHRISTINE NEGRONI

What do mice, mosquitoes, scorpions and maggots have in common? They all breeze past airport security, and they do not seem to mind flying coach.

Passengers on a US Airways flight were disgusted to find maggots falling on them from an overhead bin on Monday. Pilots declared an emergency and returned to the gate in Atlanta at Hartsfield-Jackson International Airport. The plane was emptied and cleaned before proceeding to Charlotte, N.C.

The extensive security process may leave passengers feeling that their bodies and possessions are thoroughly inspected before boarding, but there are no regulations prohibiting them from bringing rotting meat on a plane, which is apparently how the maggots got onto the jetliner, said Morgan Durrant, a spokesman for US Airways.

“We don’t like to take a delay for any reason, but a delay for insect larvae is a new one for us,” Mr. Durrant said.

Vermin have bedeviled airline officials for years. Aviation databases hold dozens of reports of incidents and accidents in which insects and rodents played a role, often by blocking gauges or clogging mechanical parts. Dan Hall, a pilot from Torrington, Conn., crash-landed his Cessna 182 into a river in Rhode Island in 2007 after four mice were sucked into the plane’s carburetor. “The bad news is, you crashed your plane,” Mr. Hall said investigators told him, “but the good news is the mice are dead.”

These problems occur most often on small private airplanes, but in 2002, an Icelandair Boeing 757 en route from Orlando, Fla., to Reykjavik, Iceland, lost altitude and had to make an emergency landing in Baltimore. Insects clogging the tube measur-



ing airspeed were the suspected culprits. There was a similar episode on an American Airlines DC-10 in 1978.

Rodents are especially problematic because they gnaw and jump. In January 2008, eight mice were found on a United Airlines plane in China, and in July 2006, maintenance workers at American Airlines said a plane in the hangar at Kansas City, Mo., was infested with mice, though the airline said that only 17 were alive.

Insects are more often a health concern than a safety issue. Some scientists believe mosquitoes carrying the West Nile virus were inadvertently transported to the United States on airliners.

“Certainly that’s the biggest, but the same is so for a whole host of insects that can come aboard an airplane with the passengers,” said Philip Tierno, director of clinical microbiology and immunology at New York University Langone Medical Center. “What’s in one country today,” he said of dangerous insects, “can be in another country tonight.”

The Federal Aviation Administration has no regulations for how airlines should combat insects or rodents, said a spokeswoman, Alison Duquette. US Airways opted to fumigate Monday’s flight, No. 1537, when it arrived in Charlotte, a decision made “out of an abundance of safety and cleanliness” said Mr. Durrant, adding that the “gross-out” factor played a role as well.

“There are many reports over the years of insects that are routinely detected on passenger aircraft,” Dr. Tierno said. “It’s one of the reasons why aircraft should be regularly treated with an insecticide, especially when they land in certain areas of the world.”

Douglas Herbstsommer was not traveling anywhere particularly exotic last summer when he had an uncomfortable encounter with a bed of scorpions. A passenger on a Southwest Airlines flight, from Phoenix to Indianapolis, he was stung on his hand. Mr. Herbstsommer told reporters he saw several more in the overhead bin, so he used his flip-flop to kill them.