

BAYLANDS

Water Boatmen

Water Boatmen are very common family of aquatic insects. They inhabit shallow fresh, brackish, and saline water throughout the world, including the Palo Alto Baylands. They live in climates that can vary from tropical to sub-arctic. Most Water Boatmen inhabit fresh water areas, but one type, called *halobate*, lives in salt water. The Salt Marsh Water Boatman is a halobate, and is common in the Palo Alto Baylands.

Typically measuring less than 6 millimeters or a fourth of an inch long, Water Boatmen are small and usually go unnoticed. Their bodies are elongated ovals. Their dorsal side is flat, their back is curved, and it and the wing covers are smooth and shiny.

As with other true insects, Water Boatmen have six legs: each of the three pairs are for a specific task. The front pair is very short with a spoon-like segment at the end used for scraping food into the Water Boatmen's "rostrum" or beak. The middle legs have claws at their end for holding onto objects such as floating debris. The rear legs are long and

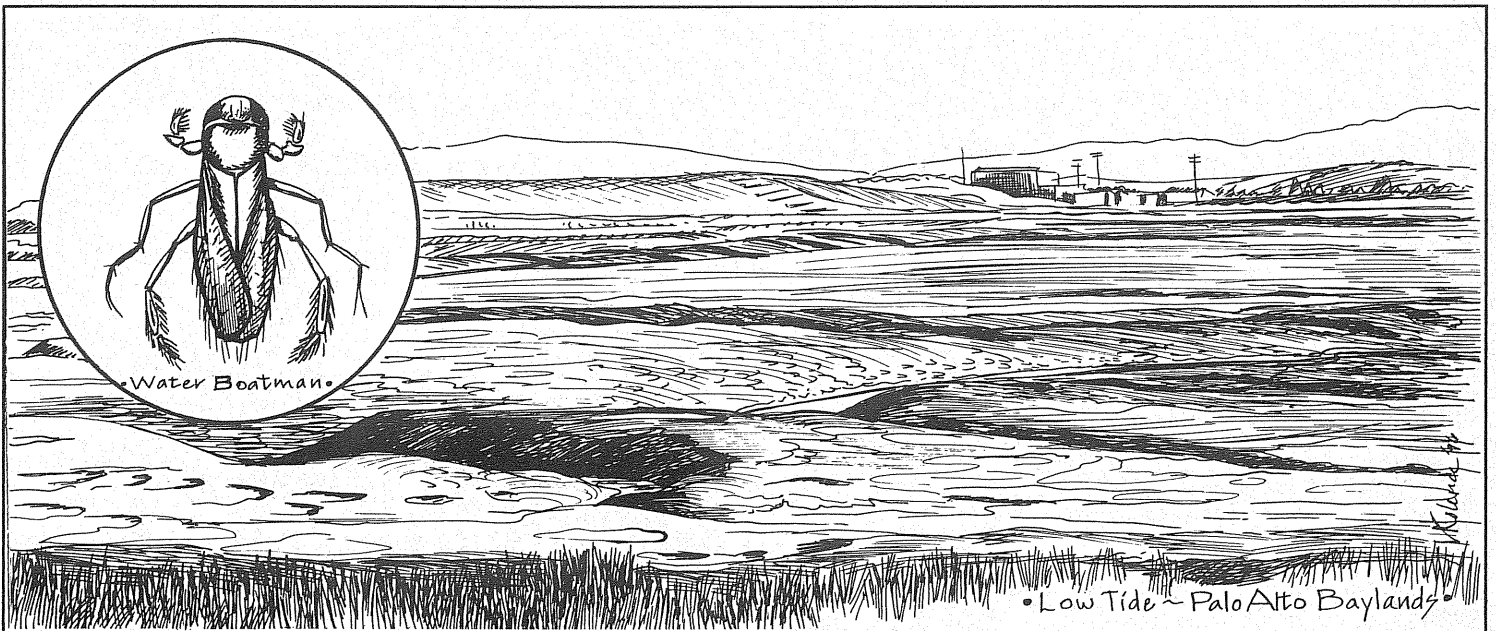
Nature Notes

flattened, and are used like oars to move the Boatman through the water.

Water Boatmen also have a pair of wings used for short flights and holding air. When Water Boatmen are above water, they fold their wings to form air pockets next to their bodies. By breathing this stored air, Water Boatmen can stay underwater for long periods of time.

Because of their large population, Water Boatmen make up a major part of the food chain in water environments. Water Boatmen forage on the bottom mud for algae, protozoa, and other microscopic organisms. They sometimes feed on the eggs and larvae of mosquitoes. On the other side of the food chain, Water Boatmen are in turn eaten by many fish and even by people (the eggs are mixed into some foods). Water Boatmen can even be found among the ingredients of bird, fish, and turtle pet foods.

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• Low Tide ~ Palo Alto Baylands