

Pesky bugs descend on Grahamstown

by Ashleigh-Kate Davidson and Martin Villet

THOUSANDS of tiny insects are bothering residents of Grahamstown and Bathurst by swarming on windows and ledges of homes, businesses and offices. The insects - scentless plantbugs - are about 15mm long, brown on top and either red or yellow on their underside. They fly readily when disturbed and congregate in masses on buildings and trees.

A barrage of inquiries has flooded zoologists at Rhodes University. Grahamstonians are worried that the insects may be a dangerous new alien pest. There has also been speculation whether the bug invasion may have been caused by global warming.

The bugs are harmless, indigenous seed suckers, and will not bite humans or pets. Also called soapberry bugs, the insects belong to the family *Rhopalidae*. They feed on berries of plants in the soapberry family, and do not damage the rest of the plant. Although they are brightly marked, they are not poisonous or venomous.

The bugs gather on the stems of low bushes and trees, especially maples, where they will hibernate for the duration of winter and disperse quietly in spring.

The insects were common in town about seven years ago, and they will probably be hard to find for the next few years. These bugs can be safely left alone. If one enters your home, leave it to find its way out again, or help it on its way.

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IT'S A BUGS LIFE... swarms of soapberry bugs have invaded Grahamstown and Bathurst | Photo: Photo supplied

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