



Catch Me If You Can Asian Jumping Worm May Elude Earliest Birds

Brian DeNeal

Here in Gallatin County we don't kid around when it comes to growing worms.

The record here at the *Springhouse* headquarters is 12 1/2 inches. Eleven-inchers are not uncommon with 8-inchers being about the norm.

These aren't your garden variety worms. Meet the Asian Jumping Worm, a species possessed of such sass and slime they scarcely can be held in the hand.

Why would anyone want to pick up one of these slithery creatures? Here's the scenario: On warm days, especially during or after a rain, these critters can often be seen squirming around on sun-warmed concrete. As worms are blind, they really don't know what they are doing on the concrete, but are out of their wet, underground holes and are safe from drowning. They crawl across the concrete, the rain quits, the concrete dries and the worms often wind up slithering until the sun bakes them to jerky on the patio. Their skin slime congeals around their bodies in a kind of super glue that adheres them to the pavement. People who like their patios clean of worm carcasses must then employ a garden hoe or paint scraper to peel them away, piece by piece, and toss the parts to the grass.

Spend enough time scraping worm carcasses every day and one eventually concludes grabbing and flinging the

living creatures saves effort in the long run. Grabbing them is easier said than done.

Some call them Alabama jumpers or crazy worms and use them as fish bait. One encounter with a jumping worm fresh from its hole tells the tale. When touched by a foreign object, these worms first roll onto their backs exposing their pale bellies. Continued agitation provokes them into a dramatic show of flopping, wriggling and thrashing. If lucky enough to contain a worm in the palm, it rapidly will vault itself right out again.

I wrestled with one of these 8-inchers for many minutes trying to contain it in an empty cottage cheese container. Each time I grabbed it, the worm propelled itself from my fingers and slithered snakelike on the pavement. The thing actually mimics the movements of a sidewinder rattlesnake.

If none of these antics work, the worm is also known to pop its tail from the body like a lizard will do to confuse the predator. If these outrageous displays are not enough to distinguish the worm from the common nightcrawler, examine its clitellum. This is the pale band around the worm's body that forms a sort of necklace. Asian Jumping Worms possess a clitellum that is smooth to the rest of the body. More common worms have a raised clitellum.



Brian DeNeal photo

The worm and I wrestled and twice it leapt from the container to cruise down the back porch steps. Either it tired or my reflexes improved, but I was able to close the lid on the worm — tail still intact — and took a moment to catch my breath. Then it was off to the University of Illinois Extension Dixon Springs Agriculture Center for Forestry Extension and Research Specialist Chris Evans' official identification.

"I think this is the 16th report in southern Illinois," Evans said on Aug. 30, while dumping my container of dirt and lethargic worm on his conference table.

The first Asian Jumping Worms were documented in Illinois in 2015, in Cook, McHenry and DuPage counties.

Above, University of Illinois Forestry Extension Research Specialist Chris Evans examines an Asian Jumping Worm. Below, this Asian Jumping Worm measures about 12 1/2 inches.

Since that time they have been documented in the southern Illinois counties of Gallatin, Johnson, Williamson, Jackson, Perry and Madison. The worms probably are widespread. People have reported worms matching the description in Saline County, though none have been confirmed there, yet. We also have good information they have been widespread through the south side of Equality in



Gallatin County, but not the north side. There might be a good reason for that geographical disparity.

Fisherman like big, healthy worms. Nightcrawlers are among the best. Imagine a worm the size of a Nightcrawler that thrashes in the water, attracting fish not only by its smell, but also by its athletic movements. A Nightcrawler that puts on a dance at the end of a hook should be irresistible to otherwise jaded fish. The Asian Jumping Worm ought to be the best thing that ever happened to fishermen. But the worm comes with problems.

The worm does not do well in captivity. Most fishing worms collected on a warm, rainy night can be stored in the refrigerator overnight. They enter a state of inactivity, but revitalize when exposed to the warmth the next day. Asian Jumping Worms don't revitalize so much. They mostly just die in containment.

By the time the Asian Jumping Worm reaches the fishing hole, it may be only a limp and uninteresting piece of meat hanging from a hook. It may catch a fish or it may not and the fisherman may cut his losses, dump his lifeless worms on the ground and switch to an artificial lure.

Those worms dumped onto the ground may truly be dead, or they may yet possess enough life to infest a brand new area.

Wisconsin possesses rich, loamy soil. Asian Jumping Worms were first documented there in October of 2013. Wisconsin people are finding once-productive soil becoming dry and possessing qualities not unlike ground coffee beans. Some areas may become wastelands bereft of any plant life. Forests are of particular concern. The Asian Jumping Worm is known as an eater, able to ingest its body weight in soil nutrients daily. Worms provide nutrients to the soil through their mucous and waste material, but in Wisconsin the Asian Jumping Worm has been found to consume more than it contributes to soil health.

"There is a big flush of nutrients right away, but not much after that," Evans said.

The worms breed without need of a mate. They consume decomposing plant matter voraciously. They can grow to over a foot long. They can evade predators through thrashing. But what impact will they have on our southern Illinois soils? The answer to that remains to be observed. Research only began last year. Evans knows the soils of southern Illinois are different from those of northern Illinois and Wisconsin and so the worms' effect may be dissimilar.

"I think damage to heavier clay soil is actually going to be less than the rich, loamy soils in northern Illinois," Evans

said.

While we wait to observe what change this new worm species may have on our soils, there are a couple steps we can take to lessen their spread.

Fisherman should refrain from dumping their worms at the fishing ground. Evans says this is a good rule for any live bait, whether worms or minnows or anything else. There could be Asian carp roe or other unknown invasive fish species mixed into the bait can.

If you know the worms are in your area and a friend wants to transplant something growing in your yard, it's a good idea to wash off the roots. Asian Jumping Worms lay small eggs that could be stuck to plant roots. On the one hand, washing dirt from the roots could contribute to the drying out and death of the plant before it finds its new home. Failing to wash the roots could result in summer afternoons scraping big, dead worms from the walk at best, soil degradation at worst.

I suppose I should let drying worms die in the sun. They seem to lack passion for living. They have no practical sense of direction. The rain will quit, the patio will dry and the emerged worm will squirm toward the concrete's edge to reenter the soil. Inches from safety, the Asian Jumping Worm will alter course in a circumambulatory attitude unto oblivion.

"Have you seen my good metal spatula?" comes the call from the kitchen.

"I'm scraping these dead worms off the back porch. I'll bring it right back!"

No, I can't recommend that tool for clearing pavement worms.

Upon hearing of my worm bounty, a friend proposed I augment the household income by selling the worms. While Springhouse Bait and Tackle has a nice ring to it, I believe that would be environmentally irresponsible as well as impractical since the worms suffer in confinement. The optimistic morning angler could become the dissatisfied

afternoon customer demanding a refund for the container of dead worms.

Leavell Hill Road is doing its part for lowering the worm population. In August, dried up and tire-flattened worms were evident every few yards. Either the evening possums don't like eating Asian Jumping Worms or else they have already filled their bellies before reaching *Springhouse* headquarters.

Tunneling moles have been very active this summer. Maybe it's up to them to save us from the Asian Jumping Worms.



Brian DeNeal photo

On most earthworm species the pale, necklace-like clitellum gland is raised from the body, but, as shown above, the Asian Jumping Worm's clitellum is smooth to the body.