

[From Fall 1999]

## **Nature's Army Tank**

What has seven pairs of legs, two pairs of antennae, wears armor and breathes through gills? If you think it's a creature from another planet, you need to come back down to earth. That's where you'll find this critter, just about anywhere there's dampness. You folks from Texas might be thinking about some rare kind of armadillo that lives in the sea. Relax, there are no armadillos in Virginia or the ocean.

Now that I have your attention, let me introduce you to a very common animal that's often right underfoot on the Eastern Shore. The harmless pillbug, or roly-poly, is actually not an insect. Its relatives include crayfish, lobsters, crabs and barnacles. Like most crustaceans, a pillbug breathes with gills. Unlike most of its relatives, the pillbug is a land-lover. It lives in moist areas under rocks, rotting wood or in damp comers of your basement.

Although they like to feel the earth beneath their legs, pillbugs are born swimmers from the moment they hatch from a water filled pouch under mom's thorax. The twenty-five to seventy-five tiny newborns spend the next year paddling in the pouch until they are ready to be on their own. If pillbugs could only talk, mom might yell, "Everybody out of the pool! I need a rest break!"

Pillbugs look like miniature armored tanks going off to battle, but they're quite harmless. They don't attack flesh, just chew on green stems now and then. Aim a broom at pillbugs and they'll defend themselves by rotting into balls. That's how we humans came to calling them "roly-polies."

Most likely I've told you more than you want to know about this lowly creature, the knight in armor of the crustaceans. Not only is the armor not iron, but the blood in pillbugs contains copper. This element is so precious that pillbugs eat their own waste in order to retrieve the copper. And we think a penny is worthless!

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