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The flying dragon leads a secret life

Over three hundred million years ago, before birds flew, plants flowered, and the great dinosaurs frolicked on the earth, the largest insect the world has ever seen, resembling a flying dragon with its rigid three foot wing span, glided over the wetlands, on the hunt for unwary bugs.

Today, the dragonfly, the ancestor of this giant insect, with a wing span of only five inches, still inhabits bogs and marshes, preying upon smaller insects.

With its powerful wings, the dragonfly is able to twist and turn, change direction in an

instant, hover in one place, dart up and down, and even fly backwards. The insect soars to great heights, able to spot food over 40 feet away, and then dive-bomb its prey, reaching speeds over 20 kilometres an

During the high-speed swoop the dragonfly spreads out its legs to form a basket. With this, the speeding predator scoops up flying insects and transfers them to its mouth where sharp, strong jaws devour the juicy meal.

When colliding with an insect in flight during a chase, the dragonfly's body cushions

the shock so it can keep going without losing balance. And, sometimes when flying through a swarm of tiny insects, they just open their mouths and munch their way through.

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Life on the wing, however, is very short for the dragonfly, only a few weeks to a month. Most of its life is spent underwater as a dull-colored, wingless creature, hiding in the mud or among the weeds of the wet-

This immature dragonfly, or "nymph," hunts by way of surprise and ambush and escapes by quickly shooting water out

of its rear, catapulting itself 20 inches per second.

It may take up to two years before the nymph decides to become an adult by venturing to the surface and undergo a great change called "metamorphosis."

The nymph climbs out of its aquatic home and awaits the change to occur. First the skin splits across its head and down the back, and through the split thrusts a head belonging to an adult dragonfly. The entire front part of its body then exits from the old skin, which retains its original shape and position, still gripping the bulrush stem or



Nature's KEVIN CALLAN

rotten log the nymph climbed upon.

After resting awhile, the newly emerging creature makes a final effort and pulls the rest of its body out of the old skin, wet and wrinkly like a new born baby. It is hard to believe that soon this bedraggled thing will be a beautiful dragonfly soaring above its wetland home just as its ancient ancestors did millions of years before.

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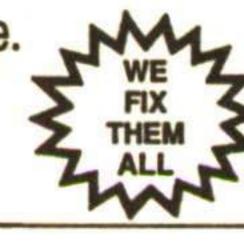
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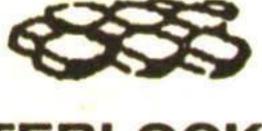
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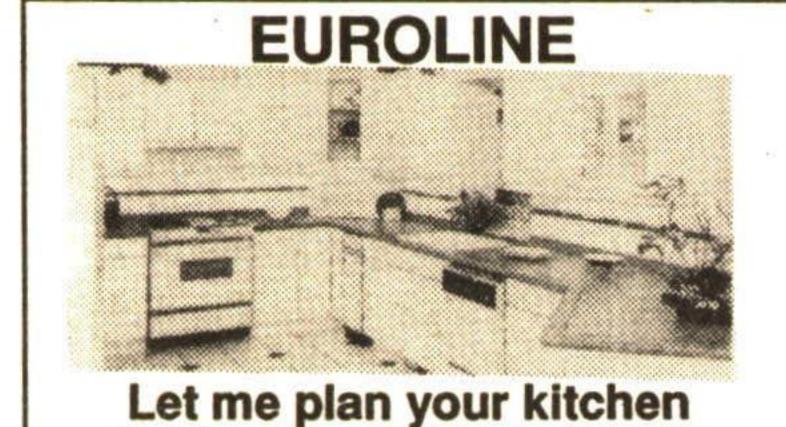
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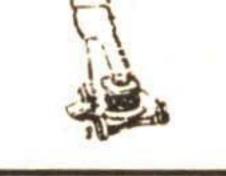
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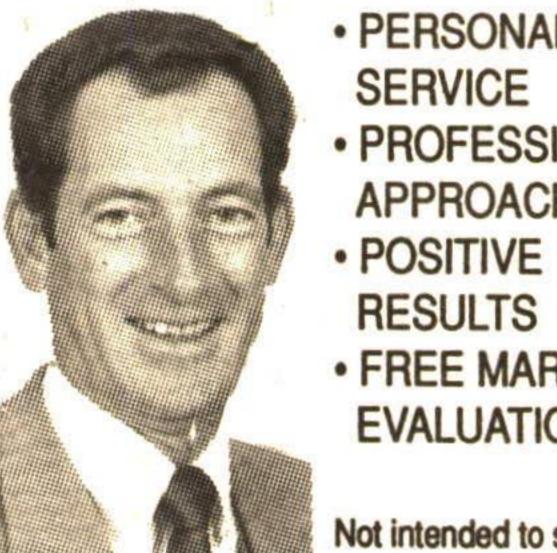
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