

TOP STORIES IN NEW YORK

1 of 12

2 of 12

3 of 12

▶

◀

METRO MONEY

Where Are New York's Bedbugs Now?

The Invasion Once Spanned Schools, Stores and Theaters

By ANNE KADET



EmailFacebookTwitterGoogle+LinkedIn

A A

Where Are New York's Bedbugs Now?
The Invasion Once Spanned Schools, Stores and Theaters

By
Anne Kadet

Aug. 29, 2014 8:15 p.m. ET

Tim Robinson

Jeremy Ecker saw the potential in bed bugs early. In 2009, he spent \$20,000 on two bedbug-sniffing dogs and launched the Bed Bug Inspectors, a detection service. What happened next surprised even him. "The bedbug industry blew out," he says.

At the height of the city's bedbug panic, his canine teams were handling 18 jobs a day. Every time the media reported a new infestation, his phones went bananas. He added a third dog. And now?

"It didn't last," he says. "Bedbug dogs is a great service, but it isn't what it used to be." The sweltering summer of 2010 was New York's bedbug peak. The little red vampires were invading schools, shopping at Niketown and catching flicks at AMC. The bedbug industry boomed. New pest-control services offered options ranging from oxygen-depletion domes to thermal-radiant heat. Lawyers took cases from victims suing hotels. Therapists treated new clients racked with bedbug anxiety.

How's the industry faring now? Judging by the city's stats, not so hot.

The Department of Housing Preservation and Development says it issued 2,735 bedbug violations to landlords in the 12 months ending in June, a 43% drop from the peak. Complaints are down as well.

Observers say we've done a lot to quell the problem. Landlords are now required to inspect and treat apartments adjoining any unit where bedbugs are found. Many businesses are scheduling regular inspections. Most of us realized it's a bad idea to adopt an old sofa found on the curb.

But the bedbug industry is adapting. Mr. Ecker, for one, says that by 2012, he realized he couldn't survive on bedbugs alone. His new outfit, Rest Easy Pest Control, battles invaders ranging from cockroaches to rodents.

For a year or so, though, it was rough going. For one, the competition heightened. According to the state's Department of Environmental Conservation, the number of extermination businesses registered in the five boroughs grew from 542 in 2009 to a current high of 628.

Mr. Ecker says that when he launched, there were just four bedbug dogs in the city. Within a year, there were more than 20: "There were tons of people who flooded in—some good, some bad."

Marketing costs, meanwhile, went bonkers. The cost per click for online search terms such as "bedbug dog inspection" soared from \$3 to more than \$20.

"The shift to full-service pest control was necessary to survive," says Mr. Ecker. In 2010, Janet Friedman's Bed Bug Busters NY extermination-prep service employed 15 part-timers. She had plans to launch a franchise business.

The franchise never materialized. And while business is steady, she's down to five helpers.

Now, the operation is tightly focused. She caters mainly to wealthy clients who have especially difficult situations—cluttered apartments that need a lot of work to prepare for the exterminator. She's also raised her rates, from \$1,080 to \$1,720 a day for a team of three.

"It's what the market will bear," she says. "People will pay for peace of mind."

That's what Midtown psychologist Steven Brodsky discovered when the 2010 panic ushered in a host of new patients, triggered by bedbug anxiety. But it's been a while since he's seen a case like that, he says. When his existing patients get bedbugs, they take it in stride—sort of.

"It's less dramatic than it was before," he says. "But it's still more dramatic than cockroaches."

Some exterminators sound almost glad the panic is over.

Bob Young, operations manager for Terminix, says that at the height of the hysteria, the company was flooded with inspection requests. More often than not, Terminix would provide a free inspection, only to find nothing more than a few harmless beetles.



SYNC.TRACK.DECIDE.

SYNC YOUR BROKERAGE ACCOUNTS. GET ALL THE MOST IMPORTANT HEADLINES FOR YOUR HOLDINGS. USE PORTFOLIO NOW »

My Portfolio

Available to WSJ.com Subscribers

Where Do Stocks Go From Here?

Deflation Risk Feeds Global Fears

HBO Plans Streaming Service

U.S. Sends Mixed Message on Kobani

\$12for 12 Weeks

SUBSCRIBE NOW

SYNC.TRACK.DECIDE.

THE MOST IMPORTANT HEADLINES FOR YOUR HOLDINGS USE PORTFOLIO NOW »

SPONSORED LINKS

2014 Luxury Sedans

High-Yield CD Rates

High Yield Savings Account

2014 Luxury Cars

Best Dividend Paying Stocks

Best Investments For 2014

Best Investment Funds

Income Investment Funds

2014 Crossover SUVs

High Yield Bond Funds