

THE ROLE OF THE NATURALIST IN ENTOMOLOGY AND A
DEFENSE OF "CURIOSITIES"

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Entomology has always looked outward and attempted to apply its knowledge for the public good. In many ways we believe ourselves to belong to a "service science", standing in relationship to Zoology as Engineering does to Physics or Education to Psychology. A "pragmatic", medical or agricultural application is in the back or forefront of many of our minds as we pursue our interests in ion exchange across membranes or the relationship between light intensity and pheromone emissions.

I would like to mention a neglected set of consumers of insect information, a growing and urbanized population increasingly alienated from nature. One that only electronically experiences the once familiar, but now rapidly disappearing or impossibly remote "ice-age fauna" it evolved with. It is my belief that we are "innately" interested in the things that have been important to us through our evolutionary history. There is an appetite for watching animals, uncovering the patterns of their activity, the secrets of their lives. This appetite was critical to predicting the times and places deer could be hunted and where bear-wolves were likely to be hunting our ancestors (could our love of horror films be due to the pleasure of honing ancient anti-predator skills?—"You damn fool! Don't go in that door!"). Many of us, myself included, spend freely to fulfill an emotional design and catch (and then release) unneeded fish. However, I would suggest that our appetites are not specific for the great mammals and birds of the Pleistocene's prairies or any particular animals of any other place and time. And what animals are better suited for contemporary "hands on" natural history than insects? The pleasures of discovery are much more available to an insect *observer* than to a *tourist* watching a patch of elk hair disappear into a stand of pines.

Some of us already devote some of our energies to "public" education, and while I can't know other's motives, it is my impression that much of it is done to explain our "business". I would like to propose that we at least consider a change of heart; that we grant as much respect to the fulfillment of our culture's emotional-spiritual needs as we do to the patent of an attractant or the publication of scholarly work. The natural historian, a person with a net, a flower press and a curiosity about the colors of beetles and the poses of flies, should not strike us as eccentric but as profoundly purposeful.

The participants in this year's Behavioral Ecology Symposium would all admit to being naturalists. In general, their topics concern themselves with "adaptive coloration" defined in its broadest sense. I will address the often fantastic ornaments used by flies to intimidate sexual rivals and woo mates. There will be a number of peculiar curiosities discussed, obscure insects of no economic importance, some described by bemused 19th century travelers and then forgotten. In light of the contemporary concerns of entomology, I would like to briefly defend "curiosities" and offer you a reason to spend your time pondering insects that will never take a bite from a cabbage or inject a spirochete.

I perceive the sexual ornaments of flies to send a special message to human receivers. They bring to us news of intellectual liberation. By that I mean that their combination of the marvelous and the mundane reminds us that the world is a "very strange place." Rare curiosities are not trite, but points where that strangeness has come to the surface—as we see the surface. In my studies I sometimes find myself falling into a pitfall that Darwin warned against, that I base my hypotheses on what seems plau-

sible. Occasionally this model or that interpretation is dismissed, not on its merits, but because it is too challenging to the imagination. It is easy to become overly skeptical and stodgy. If I catch myself, I turn to a specimen of the truly bizarre *Achias* (Diptera) I keep on my desk. Here is an animal I couldn't even make up! *Achias* is discussed in the following, as are a number of other illuminating peculiarities. I hope that in addition to its other merits this symposium can serve, like a Zen parable, as an aspirin to treat a swollen and painful "common sense."

