



## MEET THE BEETLES

BY DEBORAH MARKUS

“People ask the same questions at all these things,” the weary-looking woman said. On the wall behind her was a display of various beetles, their wings carefully spread to finest effect, one of which — a gorgeous *toryhorrhina flammea* — was to be my first major purchase of the day. Of any day, really, as far as insects were concerned. Ten minutes ago, I hadn’t even owned a shadow box. Now I was about to spend almost twenty bucks on something that, had I caught it scuttling across my kitchen floor, would have made me call the police, the mayor, the CIA, and my favorite gun nut (not necessarily in that order). Of course, since my kitchen isn’t in Thailand, I don’t have much to worry about on that score, but the principle remains the same — said principle being that a fool and her money are soon parted by a scarab with a pretty blue coat.

I was at the annual insect fair put on by my friendly neighborhood natural history museum. It sounds like a strange way to pass a Saturday afternoon (the fair runs all weekend, but by Sunday all the good bugs are gone, and so are the diehard fans who really make the event fun).

It turns out that twenty dollars isn’t an outrageous amount to spend on a dead insect. Earlier in the day I had my eye on a *chrysin chysargyrea*, a snappy-looking gold bug, mine to have and to hold if I could just sweet talk \$350 out of someone, quick. And that gorgeous fellow wasn’t even the most expensive guy there. Some of the creatures were so rare they weren’t even priced, as their owners wouldn’t dream of parting with them and had brought them to the fair strictly to gloat.

Well, gloat isn’t the right word, really, since so far as I can see there’s no malice in the pleasure they take in their collections, and they’re just as willing to whistle and exclaim over the rare finds of others. Perhaps *gloat* would be a better term. There is

apparently no feeling finer than owning, in this insect-dominated world, a single shimmering six-legged creature so rare it can stick out even in a carefully preserved swarm of its peers.

The passion for insect collecting has some analogues. It is a little like collecting trading cards, and a little like trophy hunting. But these collectibles are at once more durable and more fragile than coated cardboard. And the highly-valued, much-desired specimens are not manipulated by market-value decisions, the knowing creation of too many of one card and too few of another, but by nature’s capricious marriages of beauty and rarity.

As for trophies, it’s true that the insects are mounted as visual tributes to the hunter’s cleverness and determination (or just plain money), just as a lion’s head on the wall is a boast of strength and courage.



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But while big-game hunters are called cruel by many perfectly unfanatical folk, it would take a rare human indeed to weep for the death of a beetle, even a lovely one.

Bugs are possessed of so little brain that we grant their aliveness more automatically than wholeheartedly. It’s tough to concede the same sharp delineation between life and death that we would to any other group of beings when there are insects that can successfully continue to mate even if the female has devoured the male’s entire head.

Their seeming mindlessness is exactly what makes insects so repulsive to humans on a purely visceral level. Thinking back on

a childhood spent reading the adventures of Laura Ingalls Wilder, nothing sticks in my memory with such horrific enthusiasm as the locusts who had descended on the family farm — shoulder to shoulder and end to end, crawling over children and cows and whatever else might lie in their path, refusing in their idiot determination to turn aside for anything, even death by drowning. Insects are creatures of blind instinct, whose actions (with a few beautiful and bizarre exceptions, such as the famous “bee dance”) seem no more than bare reactions, devoid of personality or will.

The first time I visited the insect fair, I was enthralled. Not so much by the subject matter — though there is something very compelling about all those tiny, beautiful corpses — but by the people there, their energy, their enthusiasm. I never

bought anything worth speaking of (the occasional cheap weevil doesn’t exactly count as an investment), but I kept going back. And now I was going to have a beetle of my very own, a big one. I was crossing a line. I wasn’t a civilian anymore.

“What kind of questions?” I asked the woman behind the table of chitin. “Like how you catch them and stuff?”

She rolled her eyes. Her name was Kariann, and she was one of the son-of-the-circus types I was getting used to meeting here: “No, no, this isn’t my stuff. I’m just working the table for my dad. You know, the way a kid might take over the cash register on weekends at the family store.” Kar-

iann was a registered dental assistant, she had told me previously.

“But you help out with the shows sometimes?”

“Always.” Her tone implied that Dante might have come up with this just for her as due payment for some as-yet-unknown sin on her part.

Now she shook her head. “I wouldn’t mind if they asked about catching and things,” she said. “I mean the same *dumb* questions.”

“Like?”

“Like, ‘Do they bite?’”

“But they’re dead,” I pointed out helpfully.

“Yes, I know.”

“Sorry.”

“Or, ‘Are they real? Do you paint them?’”

That I could see. I had earlier passed an insect so common and lowly that his asking price was a mere two dollars — a little beetle from Africa whose shell was green and red with tiny gold dots I would have sworn were fake had they not been so perfectly symmetrical. And my son had begged for another cheapy whose blue and purple wing cases shimmered and gleamed even under artificial light. Yes, I could understand wondering if there was some unnatural supplementation going on.

“Or,” Kariann was continuing, “Can you eat them?”

“Good lord,” I sputtered. “Why in the name of sanity would you *want* to? I mean, do *they* want to? Or do *they* think *you* want to? Or do *they* want *you* to?”

“I don’t know. They’re just weird.”

I had some nerve waxing indignant on the whole edibility question. I had in my purse a small purchase from another table — a sealed baggie of “Crunchy Critters,” which are nothing more or less than extremely crisp meal worms. Salt and vinegar flavored, in this case.

“Why did you buy those?” a friend had asked in an admirably level tone.

“Because they’re all out of the teriyaki flavored ones.”

I had and have no intention of eating these myself. I only wanted to show them to people, and when I tire of insects as a hobby, maybe I’ll auction them off on Ebay. Or send them to the credit card company with my next payment.

Hey, at least you can tell what these are just by looking. The same company, Insect Adventures ([www.insectadventures.com](http://www.insectadventures.com)), was also selling candies, about the size

(though not the shape) of chocolate kisses, wrapped in brightly-colored foil. “And these are?” I asked the far-too-brighteyed young woman at the table.

“Milk chocolate.”

“With?” I pursued.

“Ground meal worms,” she admitted.

“Ah.”

“They’re kind of like those crunchy-crisp bars,” she offered. “If you didn’t know there were bugs instead of toasted



rice inside, you’d never guess.”

Which is exactly what troubles me, and which is why I’m urging you, the reader, never to accept chocolate, even from a source you have trusted in the past (I know she’s your mother; what’s your point?).

There are surprisingly few nuts at these fairs, on either side of the counter. A few Goths show up, to be sure, but mostly it’s earnest kids with their moms and their shadow boxes; a decent helping of very normal-looking women; and of course, the core group of insectophiles: big bearded white guys who often have perfectly-unrelated day jobs but whose main love and passion in life is bugs.

These guys know what they’re doing, which isn’t surprising since most of them have been hunting and collecting practically since they could walk. They know what’s worth stopping to look at and what’s (literally, in this case) a dime a dozen, and if you want to learn anything about the subject, listening to them is better than reading a dozen books. I saw one of them pay an off-hand compliment to a butterfly in some kid’s collection, and the boy’s face just lit up like Christmas. He knew how much a good word from one of these guys is worth.

There was plenty of real magic here, starting right in the antechamber with the one-of-a-kind Larvae-cam, through which the viewer might witness (beautifully magnified) real live mosquito larvae. Emphasis on *live*. Squirming. WRIGGLING.

Manning the cam was one Aaron Arugay. When I asked what he did with the rest of his life, he mentioned the Los Angeles County West Vector Control District ([www.lawestvector.org](http://www.lawestvector.org)), specifically mosquito control, though he dabbles in Africanized honeybees as well. You know, killer bees, the mere idea of which blighted my generation’s junior high school years. They (the bees) were heading our way and nothing could stop them and we were all going

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to have to live in underground caverns, surfacing rarely and riskily to forage for food when we tired of blindfish and stalactites. And now they’re here (the bees), and life somehow seems to have gone on very much as it always has.

I raised this point with Heather Teodoro, who stood a little to the left of Larvae-cam, sporting a *Bee Aware!* button.

“Should we be scared?” I asked her directly.

“Of the bees, you mean?”

“Oh, yeah.”

“Well,” she said consideringly, “we should be cautious. They don’t like having anybody too near their hives, but if you don’t follow them home, you should be fine.”

I didn’t like the sound of that “should.” “How do I know which ones are normal bees and which are, you know, the other guys?”

Her smile, always steady, perked itself up a notch or two. “You don’t.”

“You can’t tell by looking?”

“Not at all,” she said, sounding in her chipper serenity like a lady in one of those seventies commercials assuring me that I’d never guess if my regular coffee had been replaced by Folger’s crystals.

“Thank you,” I said weakly, accepting the proffered *Bee Prepared* pamphlet. I took two, in fact, to be safe, along with another, sternly titled “Are You Raising MOSQUITOES In Your Backyard?” It wasn’t until I’d entered the main hall of insects that it occurred to me I don’t *have* a



backyard, but by then I was safely away from the anteroom and into the real funhouse.

This was the place that just about bowled me over at my very first fair. Have you ever been to any kind of wholesalers market? Fish, shoes, flowers, whatever? You're immediately overwhelmed by sheer quantity. Things you've always regarded as beautiful, unique snowflakes are piled up *en masse* until you're half giddy, half stunned by it all.

I also felt a fair share of awe. Insignificance, even. Like how you feel on the clearest night of the year when you can see what seems like more stars than there ought to be able to *be*, and you realize you aren't seeing anything like half of all there really are. There are countless others out there, and you can't see them and probably never will.

So with the insects. I mean, I always knew there were a lot of bugs in the world. Oodles of them. More bugs than people,

which since most of them are smaller than most of us is perhaps less impressive than said insects might suppose, not that I'm trying to take the wind out of anyone's exoskeleton (or whatever). There are enough bugs in the world that every human on the planet could make six life-sized statues of his or her self out of nothing but live insects. Not that you'd want to.

I knew there were lots of insects, but somehow I didn't really *understand* it until I walked into that room. There were just bins and bins and *bins* of the damned things, but even so their number probably couldn't touch the number of things currently crawling and squiggling their arthropodic way up and down my street. So I was kind of mentally knocked on my ass, rather like a tourist on first beholding the Sistine Chapel but without the subsequent neck strain.

And the cool thing about it was that everyone around me was excited, too. They were all thrilled to be there. The big, buff genial-looking hardcore collectors would, it

was easy to see, rather be in this room than pretty much anywhere in the world. I don't want to hurt J. Lo's feelings, but I had the feeling that not too many heads would have turned had she suddenly entered the room. Her limbs may be fine in their way, but she's only got two of them.

"I draw the line at six legs," a collector of the southern, bearded variety remarked in my hearing. "Eight is just too many."

Which are certainly words to live by, though not everyone at this show would agree on that point. Ruben Portillo of Wee Beasties ([weebesties@adelphia.net](mailto:weebesties@adelphia.net)), for instance, had a thriving inventory of tarantulas which he was happy to chat about almost at greater length than I could feel unsquirmy about, though I admit to a slightly unnerved fascination.

Tarantulas, in spite of their macho exterior, are actually delicate creatures. If you want a pet you can cuddle extensively or wear around the house, these aren't your best bet. If you're into guys who sit in the corner of their cages looking hairy and dangerous, tarantulas are the folks for you.

They lead interesting lives, too. Like snakes, they shed their skins as they grow, leaving a perfect shell-model of themselves behind, and in fact I've seen these for sale at some of your weirder pet stores. Mr. Portillo didn't have any on hand, but he described the process so vividly, using phrases such as "hydraulic" and "fluid mechanics" and "like a tube of biscuits popping open," that I began to think that the wrong person was holding the reporter's notebook here.

"Are they poisonous?" I asked, eyeing his tranquil-looking stock.

"All spiders are venomous."

Which is the kind of no-getting-around-it remark that can really put a damper on a conversation, and we stood a moment in pensive silence until, like a considerate host in a nineteenth-century Russian novel, he expertly changed the subject.

"Hey, you like scorpions?" he asked brightly, moving to another set of cages and handing out a lovely sample some six inches in length, though it would eventually, good Lord willing and the creek don't rise, reach as many as ten.

"Oh, gee, look at the time," I said.

Many, many of the insects for sale at the fair are simply plastic-wrapped onto tiny cardboard cards — protected, but not particularly effective for display as is. What you do with the goods you buy is up to you.

Mounting is a tricky business, though the

experts make it look easy. Spreading takes a considerable amount of patience and finesse. The instruction sheet I snagged from the Insect World booth ([www.insectworld.com](http://www.insectworld.com)) mentioned frequent waits of hours or days between steps, and the work described (actual quote: “Place the first pin perpendicularly through the top of the beetle in the upper 1/2 of the elytra on the right side) forced me to conclude that I should take up something simpler and less involved, such as making my own clothes from scratch (Step One: Plant flax seeds).

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In spite of having no idea what to do with them, I have occasionally picked up insects of the two- or three-dollar-a-head variety. When you're not finding them in your flour, weevils are surprisingly lovely, and I kept a powder-blue one (securely wrapped) in my purse for months after my first show, with perhaps a vague idea of scaring a half-hearted mugger with it.

But if you want your insects in some sort of usable form, there are alternatives to buying just the raw ingredients, so to speak. Pre-mounted specimens are available, as I've mentioned. The Bone Room, [www.boneroom.com](http://www.boneroom.com), had some great shadowboxed guys for sale, including the wonderfully (and aptly) named moving leaf, some jewel beetles, and a thorny devil walking stick that I would certainly wouldn't mind watching my back in a dark alley. The prices, while not unreasonable, reflected the fact that insects do not merely fall into position and obligingly stay put on their own.

Also available at the fair were butterfly boxes by the score. I have mixed feelings about these. Intellectually, I find them almost trite by virtue of their easy beauty. They are the eye candy of fairs like this, like tan blondes on a California beach. Sometimes I almost think they (the butterflies, and also the tan blondes, come to think of it) shouldn't be there at all. I mean, you can buy butterfly boxes so many

places. But every time I see a mounted specimen, however common, I fall under the old spell. If butterflies didn't exist, we would have to invent them. The whole idea of them — such blatant beauty, alive for such a little time! And as beautiful in death as in life. I once watched a man pinning what was about his millionth butterfly, with a focus and obliviousness to the rest of the world almost erotic in its intensity. This was what he did, both professionally and in his free time. And, as he told me without looking up when I aimed a question or two



his way, he was never going to tire of it.

Butterflies are not an acquired taste. They are entirely lacking in the earthy grotesquety that characterizes all other insects to a greater or lesser extent. Still, it was nice to see a slight variation on the usual mounts. Rosie Mendoza, of Butterflies by Rosie ([rosiemendoza@yahoo.com](mailto:rosiemendoza@yahoo.com)), had crafted some displays that went beyond the lined-up-in-rows shadowboxes one sees so often. Using twigs, wires, and branches, she created the effect of a tree full of butterflies caught behind glass.

Perhaps more impressive, though, because her materials had less innate beauty of which to take advantage, were the creations of Paige Howorth; [lucanid@cox.net](mailto:lucanid@cox.net), an entomologist and artist. Her elegant jewelry incorporated the mandibles of some extremely big-mouthed beetles. The Bone Room offered some lucite bracelets in which were embedded scorpions, spiders, and bugs, but these were strictly novelty items — something for kids to wear to make the other kids scream. Howorth's creations were for grownups, and they looked the part.

So much to look at, so much to buy. Books, and bricks of beeswax, and real live stink beetles. (“How stinky?” “Depends on what you're comparing them to, I guess.”) Chunks of amber — polished, unpolished, and bug riddled. Live caterpillars for the little ones. Videos and invitations to join

upcoming educational expeditions.

But mostly just bugs. Bins and bins and bins of bugs.

(You purists out there will have started screeching several pages ago about my using “bugs” and “insects” interchangeably, when in fact bugs are a kind of insect. The interesting thing about the distinction between the two is that I don't give a turkey in the straw about it.)

One of the most beautiful collections at the fair, and perhaps the most striking, wasn't made up of “real” insects at all. It was the work of Eric Kuo, of Amazon Collections; [www.amazoncollections.com](http://www.amazoncollections.com). His creations are oversized but painstaking replications of the real things, carefully crafted from recycled paper, wire, and ceramics. Great care is taken with colors and proportions — there is nothing cutesy about his work, and nothing flashy. His beetles are as bright as those in real life, and no more so. His praying mantises (my own personal favorite insects) could stand next to the real thing and not suffer from the comparison.

Mr. Kuo loves his work. Anyone harboring an odd corner of a doubt of the innate beauty of insects in all their multifarious glory should talk to him. His quiet, fervent enthusiasm is infectious. This fair was his first, and he spoke happily of the difference between the people surrounding him now and the environment of his previous career in a rather cut throat computer business.

“Bug people are nice,” he said simply and warmly. I knew what he meant.

His art, he went on, was all about letting people enjoy the beauty of insects they might not otherwise be able to see, since so many “real” ones are rare and expensive. But it was also about leading a life worth living — doing something he could take pride and pleasure in, instead of just “getting ahead” in the traditional career sense.

“I don't make much money,” he said. “But I've earned my life back.”

Which was easily the loveliest thing I'd heard said all day: I made my way back to the Insect World booth and the loveliest thing I'd seen (in my price range) all day, she of the lapis shell and the golden-amber wings with the four-inch span. In spite of the dazzling array of choices before me, shopping for a bug was just like shopping for a new pair of shoes: don't spend more than you have, and buy what you keep going back to. ~