



Tales from a
Sisters Naturalist
by Jim Anderson

They're back...

Back in 1953, while camping at Big Lava Lake one night with Lily and Dean Hollinshead in their big tent, playing five-handed pinochle with the Rosebrooks, a sudden loud and grating “scree-haw, scree-haw” shattered the night, accompanied by something sliding down the outside of the canvas walls.

“What in the...” I muttered, dropping my cards on the card table and heading for the entrance of the tent.

“Be careful, Jimmy!” Dean shouted, “Don’t hit the lantern, it’ll ruin our game! Besides, you might get one of them things right in your face.”

I stopped in my tracks looking up at the lantern hanging in the center of the tent.

“What do you mean I might get a ‘thing’ in my face?” I asked, as another scratching sound came into the tent air and another something went sliding down the side of the tent outside.

I grabbed up the flashlight, pushed the canvas door to the side and looking about very carefully, I went out into the clear night. Just as I stood upright, something went buzzing past my face, slammed into the side of the tent.

I aimed the flashlight at the spot where it stopped its slide, and there in the brilliant light was a beetle of magnificent proportions, the winged body was as big as a

cigar, with a head equipped with a very l-o-n-g and obvious antennae.

“See ‘em?” Dean called from inside the tent. “That’s a long-horned beetle. They’re attracted to the light in the tent. Go ahead, pick it up, but be careful, it can bite.”

That was my introduction to the famous summer night visitor of the pine country, the long-horned wood-borer beetle. The one you see above is perched on our librarian, Charlotte Nitcher’s hand.

They are in a huge family, Cerambycidae, (Sarh-em-biss-ah-dee) which includes long-horned flower beetles, bark beetles and other tree-and-shrub enemies. It’s during summer that the male and female beetles emerge from their pupal cases to fly off (usually at night) in search of each other and begin a new population of beetles. The female will lay her eggs in trees that will be perfect food for her larva, the round-headed pine borer.

Sometimes they go after trees that are weak from crowding, burned, or in stress. The female smells the tree’s chemistry, and finds her way into the cracks in

the bark to lay her eggs. The eggs hatch and larvae immediately start chewing (boring) into the tree, but it’s not all one-sided. If the tree is hardy, as soon as the tiny larvae begin to chew into the cambium layer, the tree will literally pitch it out.

There’s also the “gleaners”: nuthatches, chickadees, woodpeckers and warblers that — from sunrise to sunset — are gleaning the bark for tasty insects with which to make a living on, or feed their babies.

There are also the parasites, several species of wasps and flies that lay their eggs in and on the larva. The baby parasites will slowly feed on the larva and go through complete metamorphosis in their host and then emerge as adults.

There’s also the predators who are waiting for the adult beetles as they take to wing; screech owls just love long-horned beetles, as do northern pygmy owls, spotted owls, barred owls and even great horned owls. And during the day kestrels watch for them, as they are delectable food for kestrel babies.

Which is about the same story for the Prionus



PHOTO BY JIM ANDERSON

It will not eat the hand that it rests on, but it can bite!

root-borer which *Nugget* publisher Kiki Dolson sent me the other day. Unlike the long-horned wood-borer, it’s not a passive wood-eater; it can do serious harm to any living tree, including oak, cherry, cottonwood, peach, plum, poplar, prune, English and black walnut, and some conifers.

Using pesticides is useless in suppressing long-horned and root-borer populations — an excellent reason to forgo spending money and poisoning the earth. The chemicals will kill the most effective enemy beetles face: parasitic wasps, which lay

eggs inside the larvae. When the eggs hatch the wasps feed on the living larvae, killing it slowly — and the ones who make it to adults are prey for night-hunting predators, including owls, flying squirrels, and coyotes, plus big brown, hoary and pallid bats.

The beetles are nothing if not persistent.

There’s a neat story about a lovely piece of pine furniture in a California home, that, some two years after it was made from local pine, had an adult long-horned wood-boring beetle emerge from the frame in the owner’s living room.

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