



Tales from a Sisters Naturalist
by Jim Anderson

Rachel Carson, a wonder of nature

Again and again, friends and colleagues email, text, or stop me at the post office, asking, “What’s going on in the insect (or packrat, or English sparrow, or desert snake’s or lizard or butterfly or...) world?”

I can’t answer any of those many, many questions. And to make it even more interesting, Sue and I have even had phone calls from a dear friend in France who also wonders why the German government is so worried over the significant drop in their insect populations.

What *is* going on?

The physical proof of the change in insect populations is all too visible just from driving down the road. One very obvious thing is noticeable: there are not as many bugs splattered on my windshield at the end of the trip.

Where are they? What is happening? Why is this happening?

Maybe we should be paying more attention to what Germany is trying to do to put nature back in balance.

“We human beings need insects,” said Environment Minister Svenja Schulze. “They deserve to be protected with their own law.”

Her “action plan for protecting insects,” announced by news agency DPA, would

provide annual funding of €100 million for the cause, including €25 million for research.

Germany would also stop covering new land with concrete for roads or home construction until 2050, and limit light emissions at night to avoid disorienting the six-legged creatures. (Author’s note: Getting back to darker nights will not only make the natural world happier, but save a heck of a lot of money and hold down air pollution.)

Their government would set rules for “environmentally and naturally bearable application of pesticides and significant reduction of their input and that of other harmful substances into insect habitats,” according to the documents.

The plan comes at the heels of a historic victory in Bavaria. Last month, a record 1.75 million people in the prosperous south German state of Bavaria signed a petition for a referendum to “save the bees,” calling for more organic farming and green spaces and increased protection from agricultural chemicals. See anything wrong with those plans? I don’t.

All these events take me back to 1962, while I was working with the Oregon Museum of Science and Industry as staff naturalist. I was headed for a high school at Park Rose when I heard the news on my Hillman Husky radio that Rachel Carson, the wonderful scientist who wrote “Silent Spring” and many other natural history books, had gone out among the stars.

It was such a shock I had to pull over to the side of the road; I couldn’t see for the tears of sadness that came to my eyes. I sat there blubbering and telling my companion, Mr. Owl, what a tragedy this was. I’d say he didn’t give a hoot, but I did.

Carson was one of my

greatest heroines — even greater than Amelia Earhart. In her books, Carson tried to teach us human beings how to live with the nature of our world, and what the consequences would be if we didn’t.

That day, I gave the most difficult talk I ever had to give to a high school audience. Mr. Owl, my feathered friend for over 12 years and teaching companion, even sensed my dilemma and the difficult time I had sharing the news with those students that the Earth’s great champion of justice and glory was no longer with us.

At the time I had only a little idea of how much we needed her then, and how much we need her today. Our present administration wants to do away with elements of our Endangered Species Act (ESA) that impact some areas of our economy. How inconvenient!

That means that establishing protection for Franklin’s bumblebee under the ESA is nigh onto impossible. This bee has the smallest geographic range of any bumblebee species in North America. The hills of southwest Oregon and northern California are where this elusive bee calls home. Although it has always been hard to spot, it has not been observed in its native habitat since 2006. Therefore, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service announced a proposal to list Franklin’s bumblebee as endangered under the Endangered Species Act.

Historically, Franklin’s bumblebees have been found at elevations between 540 feet to more than 7,800 feet, in a roughly 13,000-square-mile area in southwest Oregon and northern California. Their ability to survive in cold climates makes them the primary pollinators of alpine flowering plants.

The bee needs abundant

flowers throughout their May-September flight season and cavities — or holes — for breeding and sheltering. Because they are habitat generalists and there appears to be plenty of intact habitat available to them, the Forest Service determined that designating critical habitat for the Franklin’s bumblebee is not prudent.

In the discussions regarding the disappearance of Franklin’s bumblebees it is thought they are/have been likely impacted by a combination of factors including: disease, small population size, and neonicotinoid pesticides, which indicates the decline of this species since the late 1990s. And persistent threats mean this bee is at high risk of becoming extinct.

I use this example of the Franklin bumblebee as proof that something even more threatening is taking place all around us. I suggest we sit down and charge our batteries by taking the time to again consult with Rachel Carson by re-reading her book “Silent Spring.”

I was talking over the apparent dilemma of missing insects with a pal, and got around to the role of insects as irreplaceable pollinators and mentioned the importance of bumblebees, and my pal said, “Yeah! But

bumblebees can sting you!”

Yes, bumblebees can and do sting, but only in an attempt to save their home or themselves. Might I suggest that we humans also defend our homes, etc, etc.

Anyway, for most people stung by a bumblebee it was the result of trying to swat it away from the face or one of the kids. If a bumblebee invades your personal space, stand still and do nothing and it will be gone in seconds. Honest!

If you are intent on getting a bumblebee all riled up the result could be you’ll be stung. But, hey, Good People, I’ve been working with and around bumblebees most of my adult life and I have yet to be stung. I removed a nest of bumblebees from a love seat on a friend’s front porch without the aid of a bee suit and placed them in a new construction block home without getting stung.

Oh, sure, I talked to them all during the operation and did everything slowly and as gently as possible saying, “Now, don’t get all excited ladies,” over and over, as I moved the nest from the love seat and took it to their new site several hundred yards from the house. And in my heart of hearts I knew Rachel Carson would have done the same thing.

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