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Little Wasps on the Fringes

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Abstract

"As image-bearers of God, mandated to tend and care for his creation, we can welcome his creation into our human landscapes in a mutually flourishing way."

Posting about the wonders of creation from *In All Things* - an online journal for critical reflection on faith, culture, art, and every ordinary-yet-graced square inch of God's creation.

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Little Wasps on the Fringes

I caught a little wasp recently while on vacation. It was on the beach of a Minnesota lake, right up on the fringe where the adjacent grass invades the sand. It hopped and clambered about rather than flying around like a “normal” wasp, and it was very small—only four millimeters long. As an entomologist, I find insects that pique my interest in many places. There were numerous individuals of this wasp species along that stretch of sand, but we beachgoers had not noticed them before this. I began to wonder: why have they aggregated along this beach; why do they act so differently from wasps I am familiar with; what do they do in the surrounding environment? The science of ecology tells us that each species fills a particular resource space (niche) in the ecosystem. These little wasps were there for a reason.

In order to answer my questions, I needed to know its name. Names allow us to organize and communicate information, and in entomology that is particularly important. There are more than one million described (officially named) insect species, and many more are undescribed[1].

The wasp ended up under my microscope. I anticipated that I would see something through the microscope lenses that I could not see unaided, but I was unprepared for the marvelous surprise that was waiting there. Parts of the wasp’s upper surface (the postscutellum and propodeum, specifically) were adorned with dramatic prongs and plates (trust me, it is more exciting than it sounds!). This characteristic alone confirmed the specimen as being in the genus *Oxybelus* [2], predatory wasps with the helpfully descriptive common name “prong-backed flyhunters.” I had never seen this genus before.

My wonder turned to *wonder*. This is what Psalm 19’s opening verses describe. As if the skies and heavens were not enough, God gave us little wasps on the fringes of a sandy beach. Even without language or a will by which they might decide to witness to their creator, these little wasps declare, proclaim, pour forth, and display something that catches at my spirit. They retain the structure of excellence and praiseworthiness [3] with which they were created [4] .

I particularly love the way the Belgic Confession’s second article states this, because it provides room for excellent things of every sort. It says that we come to know about God, in part, “by the creation, preservation, and government of the universe…in which all creatures, great and small, are as letters [in a book] to make us ponder the invisible things of God: his eternal power and his divinity” [5].

Insects are excellent, in their way, and their physical bodies, curious biology, and staggering diversity cause some of us to sit back in wonder. I marvel at the creative

outpouring that came up with all these little things which are sometimes almost invisible to us.

How can we come to see the created wonders around us? How do we learn their names, so we have a framework in which to understand them? I have been working with undergraduate students to survey the diversity of insects present at a local natural area, Oak Grove Park, in Sioux County, Iowa. In three years of study, we have found over 100 species of ground beetles (Coleoptera: Carabidae) [6] and over 31 species of native bees (Hymenoptera: Apoidea, in part) [7].

Amidst human-dominated landscapes, a complex site such as Oak Grove is a welcome habitat for a diversity of organisms and the diversity of ecosystem functions those organisms contribute to their environments. It gives us space to see and interact with these diverse creatures and functions. Our survey work is generating a list of insect species names, but more importantly, it is opening the book to letters and pages, as it were, of which most people have limited awareness. As an entomologist, I look for insects, identifying them and exploring their biology. I show other people in the hope that they too might understand and appreciate the diversity of structure and function in the natural world, and so they might be motivated to conserve that diversity, to promote it, to wonder at it. We miss something about God when we miss letters of his creation.

As image-bearers of God, mandated to tend and care for his creation, we can welcome his creation into our human landscapes in a mutually flourishing way.
We can start by knowing about the creation and better understanding it. We can start with wonder: the wondering of science that asks questions about the things we see every day and those on the fringes of our awareness, rarely noticed, often unnamed, and the *wonder* of faith that sees a creation groaning under sin and our own disobedience [8] , but still declaring the glory of God. For the Christian, both visions of wonder can and must be active in our eyes at the same time.

Let us see the creation with inquisitive eyes and hearts. Let us see God and his works. Glory to God for little wasps on the fringes of a sandy beach!

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1. Stork, N. E., J. McBroom, C. Gely, and A. J. Hamilton. 2015. New approaches narrow global species estimates for beetles, insects, and terrestrial arthropods. Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences 112

   (24): 7519-7523. doi: 10.1073/pnas.1502408112

2. The specimen is a female of the species *Oxybelus emarginatus* Say (Hymenoptera: Crabronidae), identified using:

Bohart, R. M., and E. I. Schlinger. 1957. California wasps of the genus *Oxybelus*. Bulletin of the California Insect Survey 4(4): 103-142.

3. Philippians 4:8.

4. Psalm 24:1-2.

5. Belgic Confession. Translation © 2011, Faith Alive Christian Resources, Christian Reformed Church in North America: Grand Rapids, MI.

6. Smith, L., and J. Hummel. 2019. Insect diversity of Oak Grove Park, Sioux County, IA. Summer Seminar Series, Dordt University, 24 July. Sioux Center, IA.

   Unpublished ground beetle (Coleoptera: Carabidae) collections made in 2020 and 2021 added additional species to the list of 36 species compiled by Smith and Hummel (2019).

7. Dyk , J., and J. Hummel. 2021. Native bee diversity at Oak Gove Park. Summer Seminar Series, Dordt University, 30 June. Sioux Center, IA.

   Dyk and Hummel (2021) did not report introduced bees, of which at least two species were found, including the western honey bee (*Apis melifera*). Other native bees, not identified to species because of difficult distinguishing characteristics, were also found (unpublished).

8. Our World Belongs to God, Article 16 © 2008, Christian Reformed Church in North America: Grand Rapids, MI.;

   Pope Francis. 2015. Laudato Si': On Care for Our Common Home [Encyclical]