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CARL OLSON'S TRAVELING INSECT SHOW

By Mike Shannon

Carl Olson surrounds himself with a part of nature that many people view with disgust — insects.

In his office, scorpions, tarantulas and glowworms move about in two stacks of terrariums that resemble a bug high-rise on a desk top.

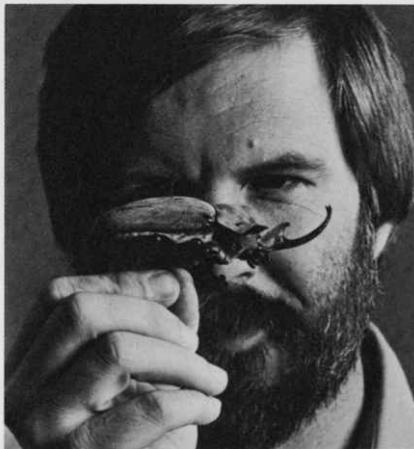
More than just specimens for study, to Olson insects are the keys to better understanding the world he lives in.

“People have this Bambi attitude about vertebrates,” says Olson, curator of the entomology museum at the UA College of Agriculture.

“We have to save all the deer and all this other stuff,” he says. “I get tired of that when they have no regard for this other life that really influences how we live more than they ever could conceive.”

As a taxonomist, he identifies and classifies the thousands of insect specimens, which are captured and brought to the museum each year.

When he talks about insects, his voice booms as if spoken through a megaphone. With the energy and excitement of a public-relations man and the determination of a trial lawyer pleading a case, he explains the need for perceptions of insects to change through education.



“There are so many bad stories and myths about insects,” Olson says. “The newspapers and the television people have done very poorly at telling the truth about insects. I try to reduce the bad press through education.”

Olson began collecting insects with his brother when he was about 5 years old, but says his high-school biology teacher had the most influence on him.

“He (the teacher) spent six weeks on insects and that’s unheard of,” Olson says, adding that most educators do not teach enough about insects.

“They never teach anything except a very superfluous look at the in-

sect world when they’re teaching about animals,” he says. “It’s the biggest group of animals in the animal kingdom, yet it receives the least treatment.”

To foster a better understanding of man’s relationship to the insects, Olson visits area schools and branches of the public library with his crawling exhibit.

He says these visits not only expose the children to the world of insects but also help them develop a better understanding of different kinds of life.

“When the kids see how neat and unique all of these creatures are as animals; maybe then they can learn to show a little more respect for life in general,” he says.

And it works.

“What do you do when you see a bug?” Olson asks 40 preschoolers at Second Street School in Tucson.

“Yuk!”

“Ugh!”

“Step on it!”

The 2-through 5-year-olds yell their answers at the beginning of Olson’s presentation.

Then he tells the tale of the caterpillar, whose life contained the hidden beauty of the butterfly.

Olson holds up a large, mounted,

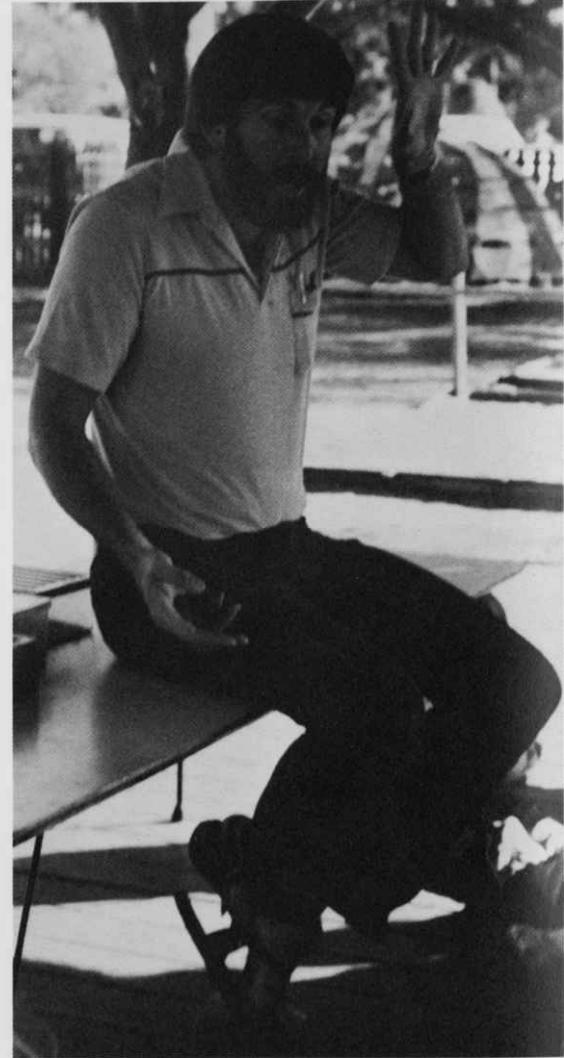


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metallic-blue butterfly. The children stare at it, their eyes wide with interest.

“Even the caterpillar, which looks like a worm to you, has something special inside,” he says. “If you step on it, you destroy beauty that you haven’t yet seen.”

All insects are special, even if they don’t become butterflies, he tells the children.

Olson tells them about stinging and biting insects, explaining that all insects just want to live and be left alone.

He provides details on insect behavior, habitat and warns against handling some of them.

Finally, each willing preschooler has the opportunity to touch a live tarantula, vinegarroon and even a scor-

pion, which Olson holds in a special grasp.

“What do you do when you see a bug?” Olson asks, repeating his first question.

“Look at it!”

“Leave it alone!”

“Let it live!”

The 40 children yell.

Although their final answers indicated some change in the children’s ideas about insects, Olson says parental conditioning is hard to overcome.

Olson’s wife, Paula, 36, a sixth-grade teacher at Craycroft Elementary School in Tucson, agrees.

“After one of Carl’s talks, a girl in my class became so excited she began collecting insects,” she says. “The mother was very upset about this and

came to me and asked what was she to do with this feminine little girl and all these little bugs.

“As it turned out, the mother was afraid of bugs. I explained to her it was an educational experience for her daughter and the bugs would not infest her house. Then things calmed down.”

Olson says people fear insects because of a lack of knowledge. That lack of understanding then reinforces the misconceptions people have about insects and damage they cause.

“People believe that one or two insects on a plant are going to kill it,” he says. “It doesn’t work that way.”

A healthy plant, much like a healthy person, has a built-in defense mechanism, Olson explains. The plant’s defenses will prevent insects



Olson tells the story of the butterfly to a fascinated group of pre-schoolers at Tucson's Second Street school.

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from overfeeding on them.

"You have to start out from the basic premise of education," he says. "Tell the people what really is going on and what a bad infestation may be."

From kids in the classroom to farmers in the field, Olson offers his expertise to fill a need or solve a problem.

Working with the agricultural community, Olson and other entomologists from the College have established economic thresholds for insect infestations for most of the state's crops.

These thresholds indicate how many insects a particular crop can tolerate before causing the farmer monetary damage.

"I have to do the same thing for urban households," Olson says. "Most

people don't like to be told that one bug is no big deal. But you have to try and educate them. If it's not doing you any harm, then it's better to let it live than to put poison around because that poison is going to influence you more than the insect will."

The best way to control insect populations is by employing a concept called integrated pest management. He says this plan brings together all available types of control mechanisms and equipment including:

— Cultural control: Keep the house clean.

— Habitat management: Eliminate living and breeding areas for insects.

— Introduction of other life forms: Keep spiders or introduce other preda-

tory or parasitic insects to control an insect population.

— The use of chemicals when necessary.

"One method of control doesn't work," Olson says. "We have to get away from the idea that there is one savior in these matters. There's not one cure-all. We have to look at the big picture. It's holistic I suppose. It's one of those hippie terms. But it's true.

"Trying to show what the natural world really does involve, how plants and insects interact with one another, but don't normally interact badly with each other, that's sort of my ball game; it's always trying to teach what the real, natural world is all about." **LP**