



## TERMINAL SEGMENT

# The Nature Nut Approach to Insect Television

John Acorn

Oddly, the thing I am known best for—being a nature television host—has never managed to find its way into this column. How silly of me. About a third of the 91 episodes of my former television series, *Acorn, The Nature Nut*, had insects or arachnids as their main theme. The program, for those who never saw it, was a how-to-be-a-naturalist show for a general audience, and I also devoted episodes to various sorts of vertebrates and particular environments, as well as techniques for nature study. It aired on a number of North American cable channels (including Discovery Channel, PBS, and Animal Planet) as well as elsewhere around the world.

I found that insects worked extremely well as the subjects of our half-hour programs, judging from the messages I received from viewers and the spontaneous comments people offered when they intercepted me while shopping, dining out, or just walking down the street. It's weird to be an entomological quasi-celebrity, but thankfully I have more privacy now that the show is no longer on the air and I have become less recognizable, thanks to hair that is now a lot grayer. Actually, I'm not sure whether it is still on the air somewhere, but I am sure about the hair. It also turns out that I don't seem to have a very memorable face—often, people recognize me once I begin to speak, at which point they suddenly take a closer look, and announce, "Hey! You're that guy from television—the bug guy!" I find it flattering that people remember me, but on occasion they call me "Bill," having mixed me up with Bill Nye the Science Guy. I can't help feeling that the two of us are not that easy to confuse.

The production company I worked with understood how well insects worked for us, and they also understood that working with

insects is a lot easier than working with big, unpredictable, and frequently rare types of vertebrates. Our broadcasters, however, sometimes felt that they knew better. One of my most frustrating experiences in the television business took place when I got a request from a broadcast executive in Toronto to quit doing silly bug shows and focus instead on the things people actually like (or words to that effect). In particular, he wanted me to do a show about the "stellar sea eagle," that was, in his opinion, twice the size of a bald eagle and common in the Yukon, a mere stone's throw from Alberta. I patiently explained to him that the bird is called "Steller's" not "stellar," that it is only a few inches bigger than a bald eagle in wingspan, and that only a single example of this Asian species (an immature, without the stunning color pattern of the adult) has been seen in North America in recent memory (near Juneau, Alaska in the late 1990s). There was a pause on the other end of the line, after which he dryly responded, "Oh, I see, John—you're telling me that what I read in the Toronto-based *Globe and Mail* is wrong." He probably still thinks that the Yukon is swarming with giant eagles, and that I am incompetent.

The fact is, "creepy crawlies," including insects, arachnids, reptiles, and amphibians, had a much bigger impact on our audience than did birds and mammals, and I'm pretty sure I know why. With birds and mammals, we were generally forced to engage in viewing at a distance, such that what you see on the screen is a person gesturing toward a distant animal with excitement, and then bringing binoculars or a camera to their eyes, at which point the editor cuts to a long telephoto shot of the faraway critter. Without tame or captive animals, it was difficult to position me, or my human guests,

in the same frame as any of these distant examples of the "charismatic megafauna" (as entomologists sneeringly love to call it). To get around this problem, we took advantage of such things as bird banding, a busy hummingbird feeder hanging from the brim of my red baseball cap, and the guest who grabbed a free-tailed bat out of midair and explained the structure of its wings while spreading it out on his belly. Contrast that to the typical situation with the creepy crawlies, where I was almost always able to handle or otherwise interact directly with the animals on screen (think "fishing show"). The cinematic impact of a person in contact with an animal is simply much greater than the impact of a person watching an animal at a distance. In support of this theory, I can add my experience as host of *Twits and Pishers*, a birding series that aired on Discovery Channel in Canada and on *Outdoor Life* in the US. Despite the clear preference for birding over insect appreciation among members of our society in general, birding television (mine included) never really caught on, and I'm pretty sure that my run of 26 episodes has not been exceeded by anyone else in television, although it has been equaled.

In retrospect, this is clearly the phenomenon that brought an end to my own time as a nature show host. The shows that replaced mine generally involved manly Australians (the Crocodile Hunter, Steve Irwin, was the most successful, but there were others) in the process of very physically grappling with and capturing everything from tarantulas to wild boar, barehanded. While jumping on crocodiles, manipulating venomous snakes by the tail, or wincing at the bite of some smaller but non-lethal creature, they spoke enthusiastically about the beauty and value

*(continued on preceding page)*

of the animals they had captured. The fact that this sort of behavior is officially considered a form of wildlife harassment in most places was not an issue—these men gave the impression that they were adventurers on a wild frontier, where somehow the rules of nature trump the rules of civilized people. My less adrenaline-rich approach was to demonstrate things that anyone can do themselves, and hope to inspire viewers to become naturalists in their own right. The crocodile-hunter wave of nature television has passed now, but you will notice that they have been replaced by a new sort of program, featuring edgy, tattooed pest control contractors, engaged in similar physical conflicts with wildlife (including insects).

As far as I could tell, the scenes from *Acorn, the Nature Nut* that had the biggest impact were always memorable because the audience could, in a sense, feel something by watching them. I'd like to say that television works best when people learn things, but I would be contradicting all sorts of evidence to the contrary—it works best when they feel, in a fundamentally empathetic way (dare I mention mirror neurons?). When I demonstrated how to use a long grass stem, after stripping off the leaves, to “fish” for a tiger beetle larva in its burrow, I touched a deep desire in many viewers, and they told me so. Even the sight of a grown man with a butterfly net clearly inspired many people to feel good about me, and about themselves. Then there were the episodes we devoted to frogs and water bugs. A number of people told me how much they enjoyed one of those programs, but it sometimes took me a while to figure out which episode they were referring to. It amazed me that many people could not remember, at all, that the show was about particular animals. Instead, they remembered only that I had been standing in a pond, wearing chest waders. The simple act of standing in a pond, combined with whatever other bits of accidental magic we created that day, resulted in an image that was clearly very powerful for a good number of viewers.

Then there were the moments where we showed creepy crawlies eating other creepy crawlies. Surprisingly, few people commented on the protrusible sticky tongues of chameleons and frogs, or the rapid raptorial snatchings of mantids. Perhaps these are now clichés. Instead, the scenes that brought the comments, and the kid art, were



The raw dramatic impact of a man standing in a pond.

the scenes where a pack of *Dytiscus* diving beetles ripped apart a big juicy earthworm, and the scenes where captive tiger beetles did similar things to their similarly unfortunate victims.

I am convinced that one of the main factors that contributed to the success of our series was the fact that I actually know a fair amount when it comes to insects. I'm not a bad birder, and I'm enthusiastic about other vertebrates, but somehow people always picked up on my entomophilia and thought of me as “that bug guy.” (As I type this, I wonder how many of you are saying to yourselves “yeah, me too!”) Genuine knowledge and enthusiasm has a way of strongly connecting enhancing communication (which may explain why the wave of nature shows before mine, hosted by

actors rather than naturalists, is now a distant memory), and when you combine that with the visceral impact of seeing such a person catching and holding intriguing and unfamiliar creatures, you have a formula for fascination. The important thing to remember, though, is that insect television isn't just about insects—it's mostly about people and their relationship with insects. But then, I suppose that's probably true for the rest of entomology as well.



**John Acorn** lectures at the University of Alberta. He is an entomologist, broadcaster, and writer, and is the author of fifteen books, as well as the host of two television series.

## ESA Arthropod Management Tests – Providing YOU with Essential Information

The *Arthropod Management Tests* is an online publication with short reports on screening tests for management of both harmful and beneficial arthropods. They also include preliminary and routine insect management screening tests.

Access to *Arthropod Management Tests* is **free** for ESA members.

If you are not an ESA member, you can purchase the CD-Rom, Online Access, or both, for a minimal price.

Contact us at: [esa@entsoc.org](mailto:esa@entsoc.org);

or if you wish to become an ESA member, please visit:

[www.entsoc.org](http://www.entsoc.org) to join today!