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VASCO M. TANNER — A LIFETIME WITH BEETLES

Hugh B. Leech¹

Only someone with an inborn love of a subject is still enthusiastically working at it after more than fifty years of study in the field. Such is Dr. Vasco Myron Tanner, by 1916 a keen collector, interested in the darkling beetles, Tenebrionidae. Certain species of *Eleodes* were causing damage in Utah grain fields, and Dr. Tanner's reaction to this challenge in economic entomology shaped his own future: he began a correspondence with Dr. Frank E. Blaisdell, Sr., authority on North American Tenebrionidae. When he went to Stanford University to work for his Ph.D., Dr. Blaisdell, professor of surgery at the Stanford Medical School in San Francisco, encouraged him, helped greatly in providing rarities needed for thesis work, and introduced him to the collections of the California Academy of Sciences. This was the beginning of his long association with the institution. There he met Dr. Edwin C. Van Dyke, dean of West Coast coleopterists and specialist in weevils, Curculionidae, the second group of beetles which has provided a main impetus to Dr. Tanner's taxonomic research. So those pest *Eleodes* motivated not only continuing studies of two important groups of desert beetles, but also lifelong friendships.

Entomologists are familiar with Dr. Tanner's publications on Coleoptera, but they may not realize that he has done an equal amount of work in herpetology. In truth he is one of the old-time broad naturalists—he is interested in all animals, and through his biological surveys he is perforce experienced in botany.

In addition to descriptions of new species, Dr. Tanner's knowledge of the darkling beetles has resulted in a revised checklist of the North-American species of *Eleodes*, and (with Willis A. Packham) a study of the desert Tenebrionidae of the Nevada Test Site of the United States Atomic Energy Commission.^{2,3} He began to publish articles about weevils in 1934 with descriptions of new species; a study of the subtribe Hydronomi appeared in 1943; one on the weevils of the Nevada Test Site, in 1966; and he has completed but not yet published a large paper on the North-American species of *Sitona*. He has also published work on *Scythropus*. These reports have been complemented by two important weevil collections at Brigham Young University: that of Charles Schaeffer in 1935, and that of C. W. Leng.

In the Curculionidae Dr. Tanner has not been held to North America. Largely as a result of their enthusiasm for collecting, many

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²A check-list of the species of *Eleodes* and descriptions of new species (Coleoptera-Tenebrionidae Great Basin Nat. 21:3, 55-78, 10 figs. October 2, 1961.

³Tenebrionid beetles of the Nevada Test Site. Brigham Young Univ. Sci. Bull. Biol. Ser. 6:1-44 + 1-44, 22 figs. February, 1965.

of Dr. Tanner's students have contributed numerous insects, reptiles, etc., from the South Pacific, to the University's collection. While Dr. Beck and others were stationed on the Pacific Islands during World War II, they made good use of their spare moments by searching for specimens to send to their alma mater. They were especially successful in collecting the beautifully colored celethetine weevils, thus enabling Dr. Tanner to produce a finely illustrated study of the Solomon Islands species in 1969.^{1,3}

Under the direction of Professor G. F. Ferris he completed his Ph.D. dissertation on morphology at Stanford University. Published in 1927, it is still constantly referred to in the literature as the major work on the genitalia of beetles.⁴ His Stanford training in morphology is evident in his taxonomic papers, but one should not infer that his interests are narrow. He began as early as 1916 collecting every beetle in sight while on family and other outings in Zion National Park. He then compiled a list of the Coleoptera of the park (1928, with a supplement in 1934).

Dr. Tanner's extensive field work led to several biological surveys of areas in Utah, including that of the La Sal Mountains in coauthorship with Dr. C. Lynn Hayward. Started, but not completed as a unit, was a proposed series on the Coleoptera fauna of Utah and portions of the Great Basin; the first part dealt with the tiger beetles of Utah.⁷ A corollary to his pleasure in the fauna and flora of the state is his long-time interest in the history of Utah and in the naturalists who have worked in it. Tied to this are the informative and appreciative obituaries of coleopterists he has published, recording information not otherwise available. A trip to England in 1957 to study types of weevils and other beetles at the British Museum enabled him to make a pilgrimage to the site where Linnaeus did so much of his writing, Linnaeushof. From this we have a very useful article, "Carl Linnaeus' contributions and collections."⁸

Dr. Tanner has described about sixty-five new species of beetles, and one new genus. I am aware of five species which have been named by others in his honor. He has, of course, expressed opinions as to synonymies, given keys for identifications, and made several of his papers exceptionally valuable by including excellent figures of whole beetles and their parts. It pays entomologists to study his publications in other fields; for instance, he has listed many beetles, other insects, and crustaceans found in the stomachs of Utah amphibians.⁹

Another phase of Dr. Tanner's work as a coleopterist is his founding of the journal, the *Great Basin Naturalist*. He saw the need for a regional outlet to cover a broad field, and of course wanted a source of publication for his own papers! The whimsical comments of that

¹A study of the weevil tribe Celethetini of the Solomon Islands (Coleoptera: Curculionidae). Brigham Young Univ. Sci. Bull. Biol. Ser. 10: 3: [1 + [1-49] + 2], front. map, 49 figs., June, 1969.

³Id. Elden Beck (1906-1967). *Great Basin Nat.* 27(4):230-239, 1 fig., December 30, 1967.

⁴A preliminary study of the genitalia of female Coleoptera. *Trans. Amer. Ent. Soc.* 53:900: 5-50, pls. II-XV, March 25, 1927.

⁷The Coleoptera of Utah—Cicindelidae. *Pan-Pacific Ent.* 6(2):78-87, December 12, 1929.

⁸Carl Linnaeus' contributions and collections. *Great Basin Nat.* 19:11-27-35, 1 fig., May 30, 1959.

⁹A synoptical study of Utah Amphibia. *Utah Acad. Sci.* 8:159-198, pls. VIII-XX, July 1931.

most experienced entomological editor, the late Clarence H. Kennedy, in a review of the first issue¹⁰ are still pleasant reading:

This is an ideal publication of the kind that most editors succeed in producing only in their dreams, say at 3:45 A.M. Theoretically the editor, the contributor and publisher are in complete accord. The editor of *The Great Basin Naturalist* is Professor Vasco M. Tanner. The three articles and page of "Notes" are by Vasco M. Tanner and the publisher is Vasco M. Tanner under guise of the Department of Zoology and Entomology of Brigham Young University. We hope that the next time we meet Professor Tanner, as one editor to another, he will give us the "low down" on any differences of opinion that may have arisen between the editor and the chief contributor. Then, too, a publisher can be irritating at times. Furthermore, there is that special case of the law of diminishing returns which states that: "The good die young." We cannot believe that such a perfect journal can last long, at least in its present form. Perhaps it can metamorphose and come up tough and enduring, a true product of the desert whose fauna it discusses. . . . The quality of paper, general design and printing are excellent. The *ANNALS* wishes *The Great Basin Naturalist* the prosperous future that such pioneering deserves. . . .

In fact, the journal has far outdone Kennedy's hopes for it, another feather for the versatile Dr. Vasco Tanner, a coleopterist who successfully wears many caps. More power to his elbow and sharp eye.

¹⁰Book notices. *The Great Basin Naturalist*, Vol. 1, No. 1. *Ann. Ent. Soc. Amer.* 32(4): 779-780. December 16, 1939.