

# LIGHT REFLECTIONS

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## Lessons from Beetles

A story, probably apocryphal, has it that J.B.S. Haldane, the influential twentieth-century British-Indian biologist, was once asked what his study of evolutionary biology had taught him about the mind of the Creator. It had taught him, Haldane supposedly replied, that the Creator must have “an inordinate fondness for beetles.”

Authentic or not, the quip highlights the dazzling, almost bewildering diversity of beetles on this planet—from the dubious dietary habits of the lowly dung beetle to the scorched-earth, no-holds-barred defenses of the belligerent bombardier beetle to the charmingly Seussical proboscis of the subaquatic weevil. There are roughly 350,000 described species of beetles. That means that of the 1.2 million or so classified species of animals, nearly 30 percent are beetle species.<sup>1</sup> There are almost as many species of beetles as there are of plants.

Beetles, it turns out, are really fast. The fastest of them all—the fastest running insect in the world—is the Australian tiger beetle (*Cicindela hudsoni*), which has been clocked at a relative speed of 171 body lengths per second. By comparison, the fastest humans run around 5.6 body lengths per second. On this metric, the tiger beetle makes Usain Bolt look like a snail. Indeed, the fastest beetles are almost too fast. Their vision can't keep pace with their movement; their eyes can't keep up with their legs. Beetles need to slow down just to see where they're going.<sup>2</sup>

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The same is surely sometimes true of us. BYU faculty work intensely hard, maintaining a demanding regimen of teaching, mentoring, research, and service—to say nothing of your quotidian labors raising kids, blessing your

communities, and serving in the Church. The rhythm of your lives can be unrelenting. It's hard to find time to catch your breath or mark your bearings.

With Commencement and Convocation just behind us, I want to thank all of you for your tireless, consecrated efforts this past year to bless our students and advance our mission—to help us become the Christ-centered, prophetically directed university of prophecy and promise.<sup>3</sup> And now, as the summer months stretch before us, I hope we can take a cue from the beetles and make time to pause for perspective.

Such pausing might take at least two forms.

First, I hope we can reconnect with our core mission and animating purpose. To that end, I invite us all to study the newly published second volume of *Envisioning BYU*. Revisiting our founding documents and grounding ideals can renew our resolve and refine our direction. “Ideals are like stars,” said President Kimball, quoting Carl Schurz; “you will not succeed in touching them with your hands. But like the seafaring man on the desert of waters, you choose them as your guides, and following them you will reach your destiny.”<sup>4</sup>

Second, I hope we can rekindle the curiosity and wonder that first drew us to the academy—that we can emerge from our disciplinary silos and relish being part of a *university*.

Thinking about beetles recalls for me those far-off days when I loved calculus and was president of the science club at Provo High School. Since then, yielding the pressures of academic specialization, I have mostly become a hewer of words and a heaver of wind.<sup>5</sup> I have loved being a (failed) humanist and a (middling)

constitutionalist. But I also sense that part of my mind—and perhaps part of my soul—has atrophied under this unfortunate division of knowledge. I hope to spend time this summer learning more about—and romping merrily through—our beautiful natural world.

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My first year as academic vice president has taken more out of me than I anticipated. This has forced me to find small ways to slow down and recharge. I've started taking brisk (but *very short*) hikes from my front door to the gate of Dry Canyon, whence I can survey mighty Timpanogos in one direction and most of Utah Valley in the

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<sup>1</sup> Credible estimates suggest that there might be something like 7.8 million animal species, the vast majority of them unclassified and unknown.

<sup>2</sup> Lia and I have been learning about beetles, and much else, by listening to a Great Courses lecture series called "Why Insects Matter," taught by Professor Scott Solomon of Rice University, during our morning exercise. I'm grateful to Lia for encouraging this small reconnection to the natural sciences—and for expanding and enriching my life in countless other ways.

other. I've also allowed myself simply to savor good prose—listening to P.G. Wodehouse while I fold the family laundry or to Dickens while I drive, and reading Lincoln's speeches when I can. All of this is good for my mental health; I believe it also makes me a better AVP.

I know that you'll be busy this summer with research trips, studies abroad, and teaching spring and summer classes. But I hope you will also join me in a modest effort to learn from the beetles—by pausing to retake our bearings and by slowing down to rekindle our sense of wonder and awe.

<sup>3</sup> See C. Shane Reese, "Becoming BYU: An Inaugural Response" in John S. Tanner (ed), *Envisioning BYU: Volume 2 – Learning and Light* (2024) 303-313.

<sup>4</sup> Carl Schurz, address at Faneuil Hall, Boston, April 1859, quoted in Spencer W. Kimball, "The Second Century of Brigham Young University" in John S. Tanner (ed), *Envisioning BYU: Volume 1 – Foundations and Dreams* (2022) 49.

<sup>5</sup> I've borrowed this phrase from a memoir by Will Durant.