

Remembering Monty Wood (1933-2020)

CONTRIBUTED BY

Robert S. Anderson, Research and Collections Division, Canadian Museum of Nature, PO Box 3443, Station D, Ottawa, Ontario. K1P 6P4 Canada; RAnderson@nature.ca

Reminiscing about collecting with Monty in Mexico

Chiapas, 1991

“I first met Monty in 1979 when I was a beginning graduate student at Carleton University in Ottawa. Each year, Henry Howden, one of the professors at Carleton, would take a February trip to the American tropics to collect beetles. In 1980 that trip was to Costa Rica and I desperately wanted to go. Monty and Grace were going and I guess Monty found out I wanted to go so he offered to pay for my airline ticket if I would collect him flies. He gave me the appropriate instructions and while there I collected a couple of boxes of big fuzzy tachinids. He seemed pleased with the catch and I hope thought the money was well-invested. In later years our paths would cross again after I got a job in Ottawa at the Canadian Museum of Nature. In those intervening years I had the opportunity to take a few trips to Mexico and had developed some good contacts there. One place I planned to go was the Mexican state of Chiapas, particularly the highlands around San Cristobal de las Casas. Monty approached me and asked if we wanted to undertake a joint field trip. So in September of 1991 Monty and I flew to Tuxtla Gutierrez and rented a car. We drove to San Cristobal and arrived at our destination late in the evening. Through a fellow coleopterist who had worked in San Cristobal we had arranged for Monty and I to stay in a spare room associated with a small local restaurant. When we arrived the restaurant was closed but you could clearly hear people inside so we knocked. No response. We knocked again, louder, with Monty getting impatient. Finally, a guy came to the door and told us they were closed. As he went to close the door Monty stuck his foot in the door effectively holding it open and in a loud authoritative voice said in Spanish we wanted to speak to the owner. He came to the door and upon introducing ourselves we were allowed to enter. Turns out they were having a bachelor party, drinking and gambling, and they thought we might have been hired by some of the wives to check up on them. We were invited to join the party and over the course of the next 8 days enjoyed the owner’s many stories and excellent food.

During that trip the one thing both Monty and I wanted to do was get into these very high elevation patches of cloud forest on the local mountain tops. Two places near San Cristobal had drawn our attention, Cerro Huitepec and Cerro Tzontehuitz, both accessible by decent gravel roads. So, each morning at the crack of dawn we would eat and head up into the mountains. As it usually clouds over in the early afternoon and is raining by mid-afternoon (if not sooner) Monty wanted to get to the tops of the peaks while it was still sunny as he expected these places to be rich in tachinid diversity. These day trips were highly successful for us both with Monty filling vial after vial of tachinids he was collecting in sunny areas laced with his Coca Cola and honey mixture which he would spray liberally over the plants around the clearing. By 4 PM we were usually back at the restaurant with me filling Berlese funnels with leaf litter for my beetles and Monty mounting and dissecting hundreds of flies, most nights finally putting out the lights at 2 or 3 AM.”

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Oaxaca, 1992

“During the 1991 trip Monty found out that one of the areas I had visited while I was doing my post doc at Texas A & M University was a place called File De Caballo in Guerrero state, another one of these high elevation patches of wet cloud forest. Monty asked if this was near the important *Biologia Centrali-Americana* type locality of Omilteme. It turns out it was and so in July of 1992 Monty and I returned to Mexico but this time planning to collect up near Filo de Caballo as the primary focus of the trip. I also suggested we might want to try the sites along the road from Valle Nacional on the eastern side of the mountains in the state of Oaxaca up to Oaxaca city as this might be the most species rich area I know of in Mexico for beetles with the road rising from 300m at Valle Nacional up through 3000m then dropping into the dry central valley and Oaxaca City.

We flew into Acapulco and rented a car, a newer model that took unleaded gas. At that time unleaded gas was not common in Mexico and only a few Pemex stations carried it so we had to be careful not to get caught between gas stations with ‘sin plomo’. It took less than a day for us to get stranded. On the main highway south out of Acapulco we made it about 100 kms before we ran out of gas. Monty got out of the car and flagged down a passing truck and shouted “I’ll be back” and off he went. About 2 hours later he was back, in a taxi, with a full jerry can of ‘sin plomo’. Turns out he had to go about 60 kms to find the right gas station. For the rest of the trip we filled up every time we passed a station with the right gas. After heading south along the coast and taking forays up into the mountains down to Puerto Escondido, we turned around and went back up to Chilpancingo in Guerrero from where we would conduct daily trips up to Filo de Caballo – there being no accommodations in the highlands. We carried out 4 or 5 such daily trips having great success finding lots of both flies and beetles. On our last day at the hotel the young front desk clerk finally asked what we were doing. We told her we were entomologists and after she had told us how dangerous it was up there she laughed and said that the staff thought we were from the U.S. Drug Enforcement Agency (or DEA). We laughed as well, but inside were thinking how lucky we were that the people up in Filo de Caballo did not think the same thing. Maybe they did?

Like many great entomologists Monty loved field work. I was fortunate to have taken these two memorable trips with him and to have shared his companionship. He was a wonderful man, generous with his time, his knowledge and friendship.”

Bob Anderson, Ottawa

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CONTRIBUTED BY

Pierfilippo Cerretti, Dipartimento di Biologia e Biotecnologie “Charles Darwin”, Sapienza Università di Roma, Piazzale A. Moro 5, 00185, Rome, Italy; pierfilippo.cerretti@uniroma1.it



Monty Wood (centre) with Jim O'Hara (left) and Pierfilippo (right) after a day of collecting during the field meeting of the North American Dipterists Society in Silver City, New Mexico, USA, August 2007.

“People who knew Monty personally agree in recognising him as a great interpreter of the natural world in general and a generous colleague always willing to share his knowledge. Monty’s written contribution to the knowledge of tachinids (which is my main scientific interest and the reason why I met him in 1998, during the 6th ICD in Oxford, UK) is remarkable, but what makes Monty special, not to say mysterious and fascinating, is that what he wrote is nothing compared to his actual knowledge on this subject. Much of his knowledge was thus delivered personally in a Socratic fashion. While talking, Monty could spin together anecdotal stories with great pieces of knowledge that could change your point of view once and for all. And one of my favourite places where I conversed with him was in the aisles among the cabinets of the CNC tachinid collection in Ottawa, where Monty had a chunk of the immense complexity of tachinid diversity at hand. He liked to pick out and show me ‘tricky’ specimens; those that puzzle any taxonomist by rejecting easy answers about taxa circumscriptions, and I liked that too! For each of the ones he had collected himself, he remembered the place of collection and circumstances (i.e., weather conditions, time of the day, place of sitting), with details on behaviour and personality of the fly. So, a single fly turned often into a trigger to talk about nature in general. — Monty, you had a deep impact on my way of thinking as a tachinid taxonomist, thank you very much, I will miss you!”

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CONTRIBUTED BY

Jorge F. Corrales, Costa Rica (formerly at Instituto Nacional de Biodiversidad [INBio], Santo Domingo, Heredia); jorgecorralesmayorga@gmail.com

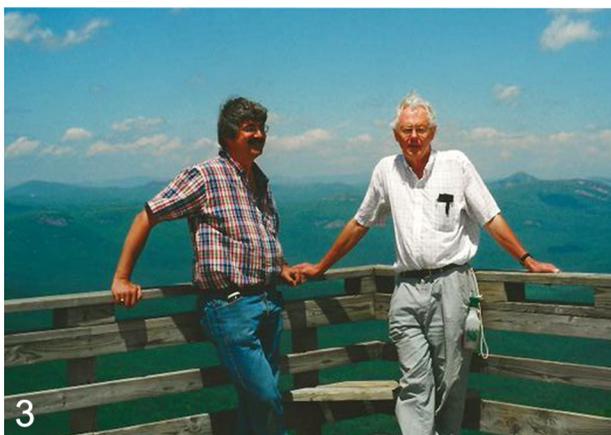


“By 1999, the National Institute of Biodiversity (INBio) in Costa Rica had an excellent group of expert collaborators who came and went. Some of them became well-known and well-loved faces. One was Monty, a kind and placid man. Always with a smile on his face, always listening patiently before answering. He didn’t miss an opportunity to practice his Spanish. He loved what he did. I first met Monty in 1992. The day I met him, a colleague informed me that he was an expert on Tachinidae and I did not waste a second in going to him and introducing myself: ‘Hello! My name is Jorge Corrales and I work with Limacodidae’. To which he replied with a smile: ‘Limacodidae? mm ... *Austrophorocera* food!’ From there we became friends and he frequently came to my office to talk about anything but Tachinidae. At that time we drew caricatures of all the staff in the Entomology and Botany department and dear Monty was included as one of only two non-staff to be granted such an ‘honor’. This drawing was based on sketches I made of Monty in the field and at lunch times. I remember him fondly.”

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CONTRIBUTED BY

Gregory A. Dahlem, Department of Biological Sciences, Northern Kentucky University, Highland Heights, Kentucky 41099, USA; dahlem@nku.edu



1. Monty, Grace and Civil War cannon at summit of Kennesaw Mountain, Cobb County, Georgia. **2.** Monty and Grace at Rabun Bald lookout tower, Chattahoochee National Forest, Rabun County, Georgia. Good tachinid and sarcophagid collecting! **3.** Greg and Monty at Rabun Bald lookout tower. **4.** Grace and Monty at Rabun Bald lookout tower.

Greg, a sarcophagid specialist, has a passion for collecting sarcs on mountain summits where males congregate to “hilltop” and mate with more transitory females. Tachinids also “hilltop” and Monty sought out summits on every continent he visited, with great success. Harold Dodge and John Seago collected sarcs on hilltops in Georgia (USA) in 1952* and Greg suggested to Monty and Grace that they should revisit some of the hilltops to see what interesting species they might catch there nearly 50 years later. Monty and Grace jumped at the chance and the three of them set forth on a tour of six Georgia hilltops in May of 2000. The pictures above are from that trip.

An account of the trip is given here: <https://www.nku.edu/~dahlem/GA%202000/gatrip.htm>

* Dodge, H.R. & Seago, J.M. (1954) Sarcophagidae and other Diptera taken by trap and net on Georgia mountain summits in 1952. *Ecology*, 35, 50–59.

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CONTRIBUTED BY

James E. O'Hara, Canadian National Collection of Insects, Agriculture and Agri-Food Canada, 960 Carling Avenue, Ottawa, Ontario, K1A 0C6, Canada; james.ohara@canada.ca



Pictures from the field meeting of the North American Dipterists Society, Silver City, New Mexico, USA, 13–16 August 2007. Above: Monty Wood, Jeff Cumming and Grace Wood take a break from collecting at Cherry Creek campground area in Gila National Forest ca. 17kms north of Silver City. Left: Jim O'Hara and Monty pose for a picture while hilltopping on the summit of Eighty Mountain in Gila N.F. ca. 7kms north of Silver City.

“Monty and Grace spent a lot of time travelling the world in search of tachinids after Monty’s early retirement in 1986. For trips within Canada and United States they frequently took their truck camper and spent their nights in national forests and campgrounds close to good collecting spots. I was pleased when they decided to drive down to New Mexico in 2007 to attend the only NADS field meeting I ever organized. It was held in Silver City just south of Gila National Forest. The southern portion of the national forest is one of the best spots in southwestern United States for tachinid collecting and a personal favorite of mine. Although the meeting was held in the middle of the monsoon season (the best time for tachnids), we had uncommonly clear skies and perfect temperatures. Monty and Grace were very pleased with the number and diversity of tachinids they caught and with the comradery of fellow dipterists. They returned to Silver City in their camper in 2011 to collect in the area again.”

More about the NADS field meeting here:

O’Hara, J.E. (2007) Field meeting of the North American Dipterists Society, Silver City, New Mexico, 13-16 August 2007. *Fly Times*, 39, 3–5.

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CONTRIBUTED BY

David Yeates, Director, Australian National Insect Collection, National Research Collections Australia, CSIRO, PO Box 1700, Canberra ACT 2601, Australia; David.yeates@csiro.au



“I have one photo to share, This picture was taken in Canberra in August 2012 when Monty and Grace last visited Australia. Brian Wiegmann was visiting on sabbatical and the fourth person in the photo is my wife Francoise Berlandier. Monty spent a number of weeks in ANIC sorting and identifying our tachinids, and sampling our red wine in the evenings. I remember him saying that there were many tachinid groups in Australia that looked superficially like Northern Hemisphere groups, but were not related. He was always a very knowledgeable and approachable colleague, and his contributions to the Manual of Nearctic Diptera stand as testament to his global impact, vision, passion and expertise.”