

“I only eat one fly a year.” (If I’m lucky)

By Jim Stiles

I rarely write about my wanderings on the Colorado Plateau and I especially avoid mentioning locations and destinations; as a result some of my readers have assumed I never go anywhere at all. And while lately I seem to have found myself a bit more reclusive than normal and watching

“Lonesome Dove” far more than any sane man could justify, I do indeed get out there in the rocks from time to time.

I simply don’t want to promote this country any more than it’s already been. Like I wrote in *Brave New West*, I’m not here to “describe this land in such alluring and seductive prose that you feel moved to grab your titanium bike and zip over here for the weekend....I can’t”

But occasionally, I will tell a travel yarn about Australia, as I have in this issue (See “Hell is the Gunbarrel Highway”)

And so the omnipresent critic asks smugly, “If you’re so damn worried about keeping places a secret, why are you writing about Australia?”

And I reply, “Have I told you about the flies?”

Its scientific name is *Musca vetustissima*; its common name is “bush fly,” but other references and names given to this evil little creature cannot be uttered in a wholesome publication such as this. But it is fair to say that the bush fly is everywhere. It cannot be avoided. Some believe that it should be proclaimed Australia’s national bird, as it is surely its most common winged creature, even if it lacks other avian qualities.

When I caught my first glimpse of Australia television, whether it was the nightly news, or a sporting event, if the programming occurred outside, I noticed a quirky but consis-

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tent gesture from anyone who appeared onscreen. It could be a cricket star or the host of an outdoors adventure show or the prime minister himself. Throughout the performance or interview, the onscreen personality had a habit of slowly but frequently moving his hand across his face. It was never a quick jerky swipe; instead, the movement was almost a casual, slow-motion wave. A peculiar gesticulation. I would learn later that it’s called “The Australian Salute.”

These flies are so evil and so vindictive that if the human victim lashes out at them with too much fury, the flies respond in kind. And so all one can do is move your hand slowly, in the hope you can simply annoy them enough to go bother someone else. A common ploy among those who like to take a morning or afternoon stroll is to snap off the small bough of a gum tree and wave it slowly in front of your face as you walk. This technique works for a while, until the flies figure it out and find other ways to get past the gum bough defense.

The photographs included in this story may cause the reader to recoil in horror, but in fact it is the best scenario one can hope for in Flyland. If the flies can be appeased by parking themselves on the back of your shirt or daypack in a relatively static position, in a location that is physically impossible for you to see, then be grateful. The alternatives are so much worse.

It is almost impossible to survive a trip to Australia without either swallowing or inhaling through your nostrils at least one fly per visit. Sooner or later, no matter how consistently you perform the Aussie Salute, a fly, moving at just the proper trajectory, at the exact speed needed to bypass your defensive efforts, will either enter your mouth while you perform the unavoidable function of speech (under no circumstances ever yawn outside!), or fly up your nose. I cannot tell you the exact air speed of a bush fly but can testify from experience, without hesitation, that it is fast enough to cause the fly to reach the upper processes of your nasal cavities before you even realize the intrusion has occurred.

It’s fair to ask, while flies inhabit nearly every corner of the earth in numbers that vary with climate and geography, why are there such a multitude of “bloody damn flies” in the Land Down Under. And the truth is, as is so often the case, there were NOT so many “bloody damn flies” until we white guys showed up.

The long and hideous history of the Northern European’s intrusion and disruption to the far corners of the planet, of not just its indigenous human populations but of the earth’s natural history as well, has been expressed in millions of words and ignored by practically everyone who descends from those who reside or came from those North Atlantic regions. Today we only have time to explain the prolific aspects of the Australian bush fly and why white guys are to blame.

It can be explained in a word...bullshit.

Though flies have no less a preference for the defecations deposited by females ungulates. Nor do the feces of those unfortunate castrated steers offer less appeal.

There is no medium more appealing as a repository for bush fly eggs than the Great and Juicy Cow Pie. Before the arrival of domestic cattle there was not an animal on the Australian continent that produced such a perfect breeding ground.

When the first colonists from England reached Australia in 1788, they brought five cows and two bulls. Today there are more than 20 million cattle in Australia. According to fly expert, author Jim Heath, “...each (of them) drop around ‘12’ pads a day. And from each pad as many as 2000 flies can emerge (Mathematical readers might like to calculate whether there are more stars in our galaxy, or more bush flies produced in Australian cow dung.)”

If there has been any success in the war against the Aussie bush fly, it has come from the other side of the planet. Dung beetles are native to Australia but for the Aussie variety, the cow pies they confront are simply too big and too wet. But for once, meddling in the natural order of things has produced some measure of success. For a few decades now,



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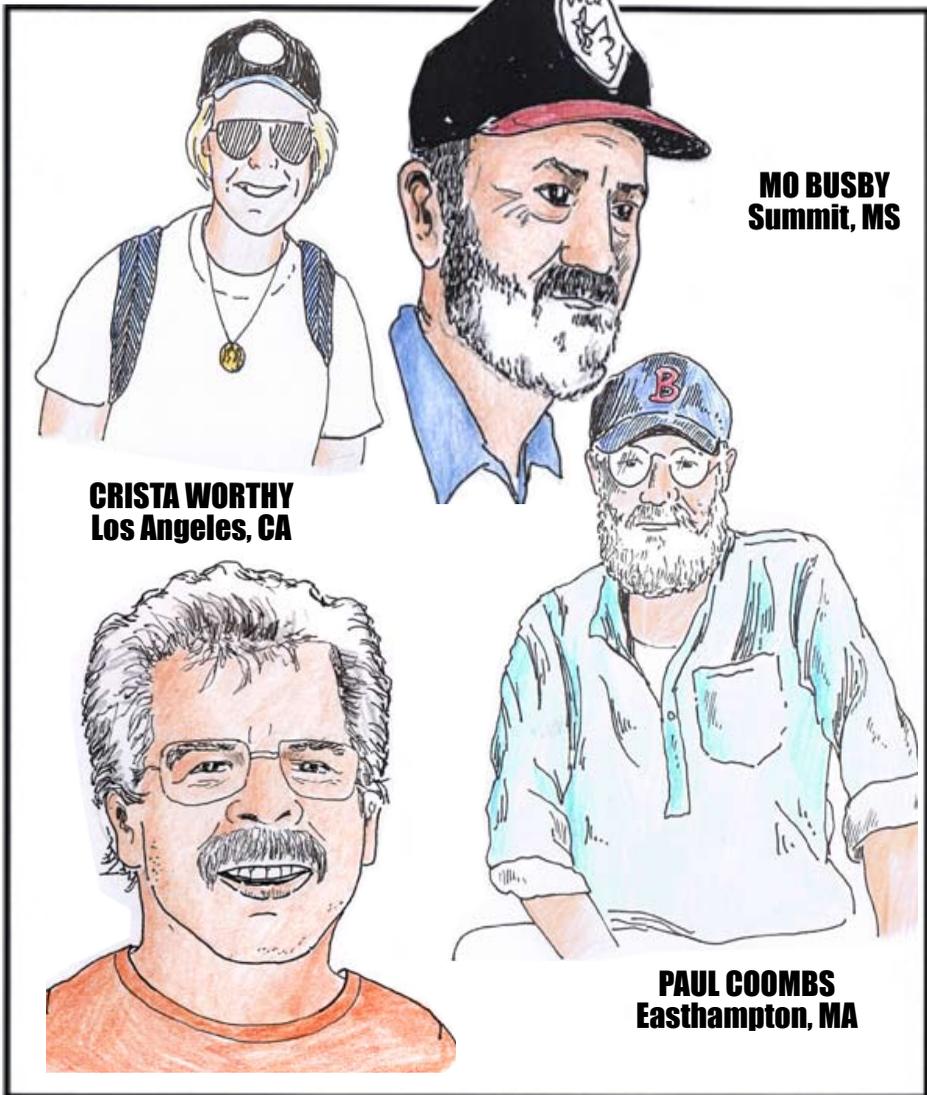
scientists have been introducing varieties of the African dung beetle. And in some places, at long last, the cow pies and the eggs that inhabit them have met their match. According to Jim Heath, “Dung beetles spend as much time in dung as fish do in water. They breed in dung. They eat dung. They grow up in it. The only time they aren’t actually living in it—or ‘working’ in it—is when they’re flying around looking for a fresh mass of it.”

And he is right. I have watched a fresh cow pie desicated by dung beetles in a matter of hours. But dung beetles only hatch their eggs when the weather warms up. Until the temperature strikes 85 F, the flies get a free ride to torture at will and with extreme prejudice. And Australia’s moderate climate (it rarely freezes anywhere in Australia) means the bush flies never go away entirely.

So...next time I wax poetic about my second home in the Land of Oz, know that I travel there at the risk of my own sanity, or what’s left of it. As to the question of encouraging tourism to Australia, as my mates down there like to say, “Have a go, mate...let us know how she turns out.”

But if you dare to venture there, remember my warning—don’t yawn out of doors.

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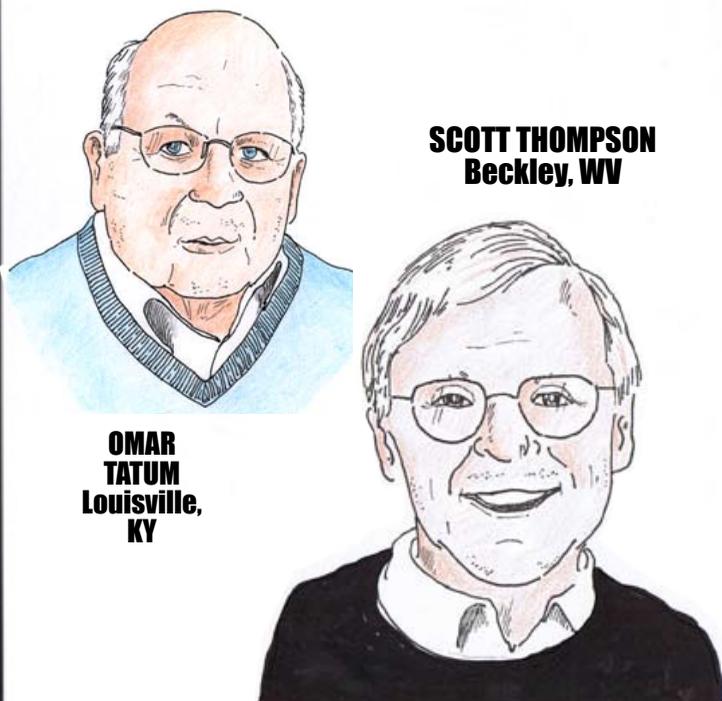
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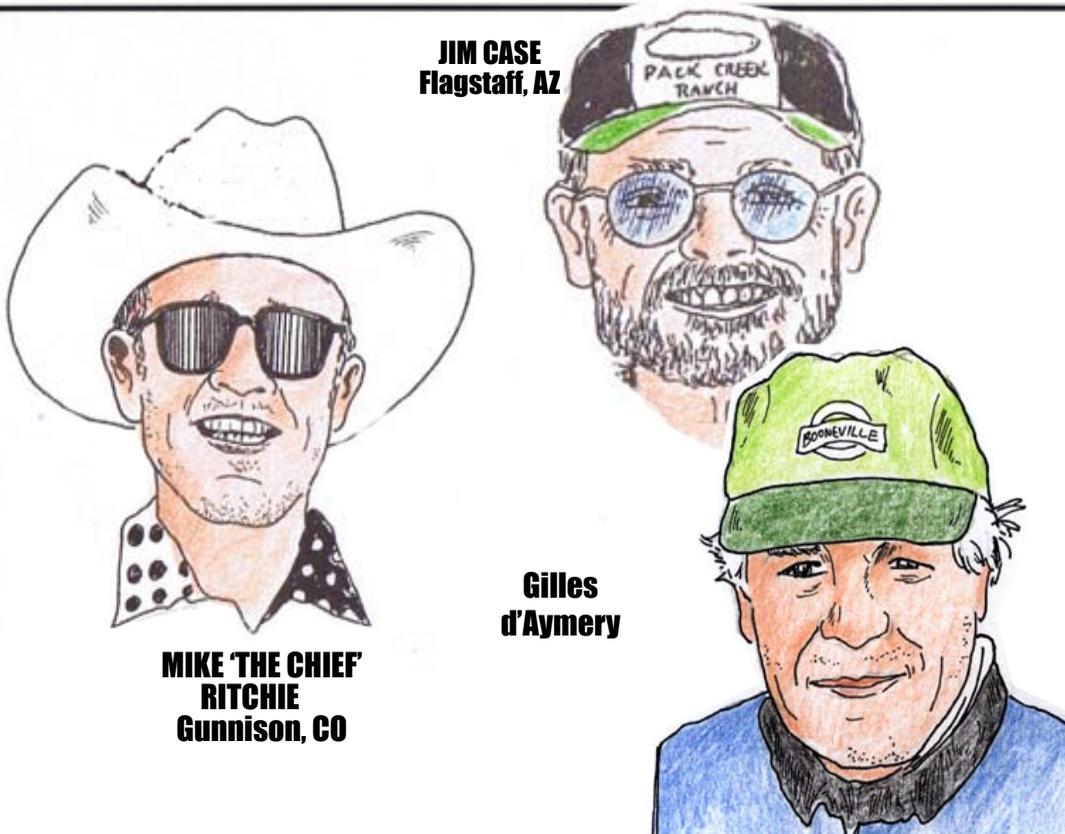
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