Six-Legged Cows

Have you heard of six legged cows? Some of them green in colour, some pink, some brown and black. Some even winged! These strange creatures are the ant-cows. So called because they are looked after and milked by certain kind of ants. They are really known as Aphids. They are a tiny pear-shaped plant-lice, which live by sucking the sap of plants. They exude a sugary substance called honey-dew and it is for this honey-dew that the ants take great pains over them. They look after and care for their tiny 'cows' just as we tend and herd our cows for the milk they give. Some even build special sheds for the aphids near their own nest.

The mother aphid lays her eggs in autumn and these eggs are collected by the ants and tended during the long winter months. In spring the young aphids hatch out and the ants take them out to graze. The ant 'cowherds' stand by, ready to drive away any enemy that would molest their charges. In return for such devoted care, the aphids give their masters, plenty of honey-dew, whenever they ask for it.

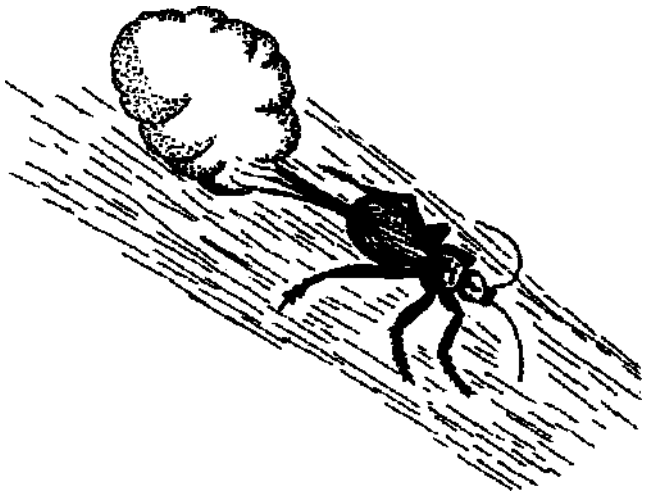
He can't be Weighed Down

The Hero Shrew is found in West Africa, where they believe that if you carry his ash, you can be a hero too! His heroism would appear to lie in his incredible powers of resistance to pressure. A full grown man can stand on the Hero's back pressing his entire weight on the creature. Any other animal of this size would be crushed into a pulp, but not the Hero. He merely waits for the man to get down—shakes himself and runs off!

This is because he has a thick backbone designed specially to withstand heavy weights. Why this tiny animal which lives mostly on insects should have this special weight-proof back is still a mystery.

Bombardier Beetle

One of the most interesting of insects is the Bombardier Beetle. A fast-moving creature it seems to be the only creature in nature which knows the use of explosives. The Bombardiers are colourful fellows with yellow heads and legs while the wing covers are dark blue, greenish blue or even black.

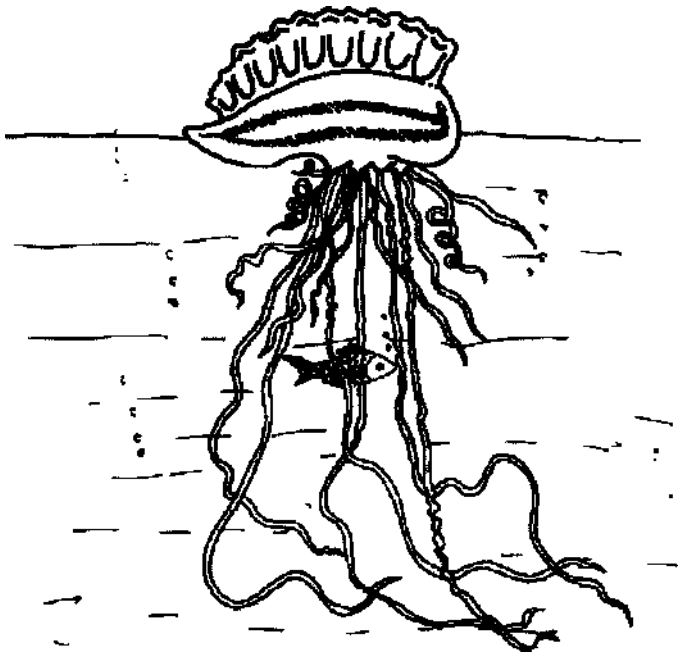


The Bombardier is so called because he is quite literally a bombardier. At the end of his body he has "guns" in the form of tiny sacs containing a fluid which can be squirted out. This fluid has caustic properties and its effects on the skin are like those of nitric acid. When this volatile fluid comes in contact with air it changes into a jet of smoke with a distinct popping sound.

A well aimed discharge from these guns can lay even big insects low. But most of the time the Bombardier uses it only to cover his retreat. When it sees an enemy he turns and fires his tiny guns at the enemy's face. There is a volley of sharp pops followed by little puffs of acrid smoke. The enemy is taken aback by this surprise attack and the sudden appearance of smoke. Taking advantage of this smoke-screen the Bombardier escapes.

Marine Alliance

One of the strangest friendships in the animal world is that of *Physaha* and *Nomeus. A* relative of the jelly-fish. Physalia is a beautiful creature with a pyramid shaped float coloured in the most appealing shades of blue. But this beauty hides one of the deadliest natures in the world and a poison more potent than that of the cobra in the numerous stinging cells of its many long tentacles. Popularly known as the Portuguese Man-of-War is a terror to animals in the sea where it lives, even human beings give it a wide berth.



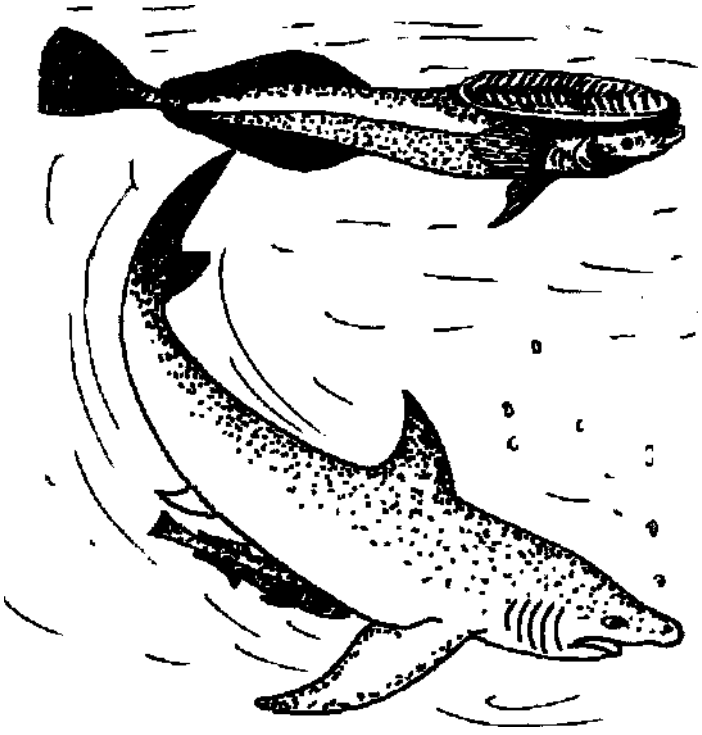
Living beneath the float among its tentacles is the family of *Nomeus,* the tiny fish friends of *Physalia.* Why the tentacles do not injure them is a mystery. Immuned, the little fish play with the thousands of stinging cells secure from enemies that feed on them.

In return for the security provided by their friend, these fish draw a number of bigger fish near the tentacles. Those venturing too near chasing the tiny Nomeus are killed by the stinging cells. Then the allies share the dinner.

Stocking the Larder

Like the butcher, the Red Backed Shrike has a number of 'joints' hanging around and this is why it is called the 'Butcher Bird'. This small bird has a curious habit of maintaining a larder—a rare thing among birds. It is a ferocious and bold creature and kills any number of small mammals and birds to satisfy its voracious appetite. It never stops hunting and it impales all the surplus food on thorns near its nest. During the breeding season, when large amounts of food are required for young as well, the Shrike has no difficulty about its food supply. Scores of 'joints'—bees, grasshoppers, crickets, mice, voles, shrews, lizards and small birds are found hanging in its open air larder.

Sticking Around



Remora—the Sucker Fish—is not what some may think his name implies, for he excels in getting free lifts. Somewhat like a mackerel in shape, about a foot and a half or two in length, he carries on top of his head a great oval disc. With the aid of this sucker the fish is able to attach himself with great, tenacity to anything. Once the disc sticks, it is very difficult to dislodge the fish. He uses his disc on sharks, turtles, whales and even ships and thus rides freely to wherever he wants to go. It can swim but prefers a lift. When a shark carrying Remora is having dinner, the passenger leaves his seat for a meal on the left-overs. Then he is back in his place. Fishermen in many countries use the Sucker Fish to catch turtles. They tie a long line to the fish's tail and launch him out. Remora attaches himself to a turtle, the line becomes taut and both the fish and the turtle are easily hauled in, for the Sucker Fish will not release his hold at any cost.

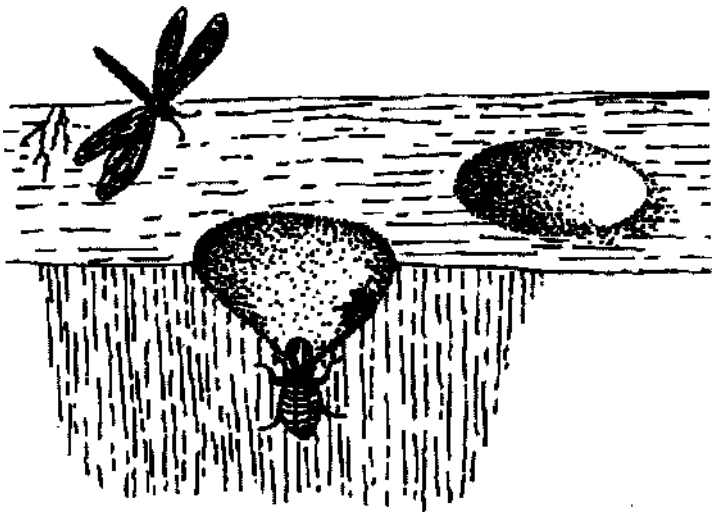
He Sets Traps

Ant-lion Flies look very much like dragon flies. While the larvae of these insects eat very well indeed, they themselves have such weak mouths that they hardly eat at all.

The larvae also look very different from their mothers, with round, flat wingless bodies. By means of a pair of pincer-like jaws they suck up small insects—mostly ants—hence the name "Ant Lion".

To catch ants the young Ant Lion constructs a funnel-shaped cavity in loose sand and waits at the bottom of the pit with only its jaws projecting out. Any insect running along the edge of the pit dislodges the sand of the sloping sides and starts a miniature land-slide. The Ant Lion jerks some of the sand by means of its head towards the sliding victim and continues to do so till the latter is brought to the bottom of the pit. Here it is immediately seized by the pincher-like jaws and sucked dry. The body of the victim is then ejected from the pit by a flick of the hunter's head.

The Ant Lion though small is so strong that it can throw a stone ten times its size clear out of the pit with a single

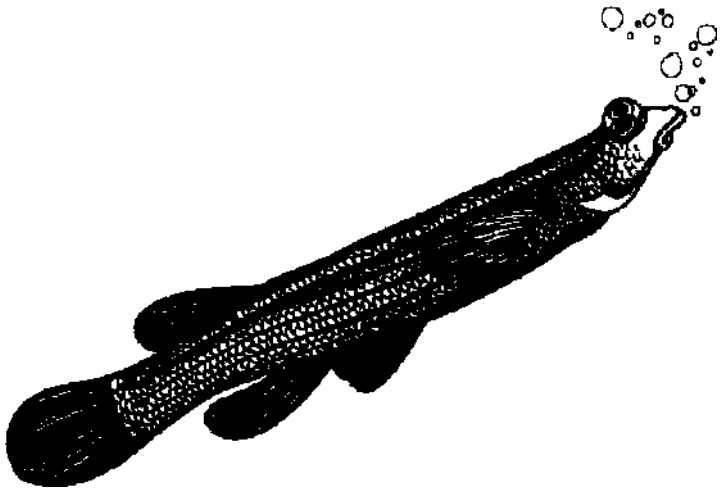


Double Vision

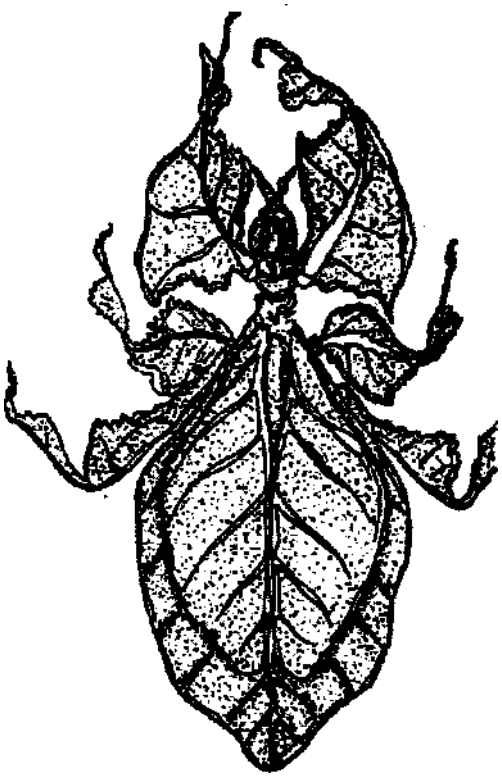
In the quiet rivers and inlets of the Caribbean Sea region lives *Anableps* the "Four-eyed Fish." Though he is called the fish with four eyes, he really has only two. But these are of a special kind unlike those of any other vertebrate animal. They are built for two kinds of vision. There is a partition hi the middle of the eyes and each eye has two sets of pupils—one above the other. The upper pupils are out of the water when the fish is at the surface, and are meant for aerial vision. The fish sees in the water beneath the surface with the lower half.

This is a convenient arrangement for him because he likes to swim up at the surface and feed on the tit-bits found floating there. As he moves along feeding he can spot trouble both in the air and in the water. Another odd thing about Anableps is that he has no tear glands to keep the air eyes moist and so he has to duck every few minutes to wet his upper eyes.

These fishes usually go about in schools and it is very funny to watch them swimming along with only the top halves of their eyes sticking out of water.



The Walking Leaf



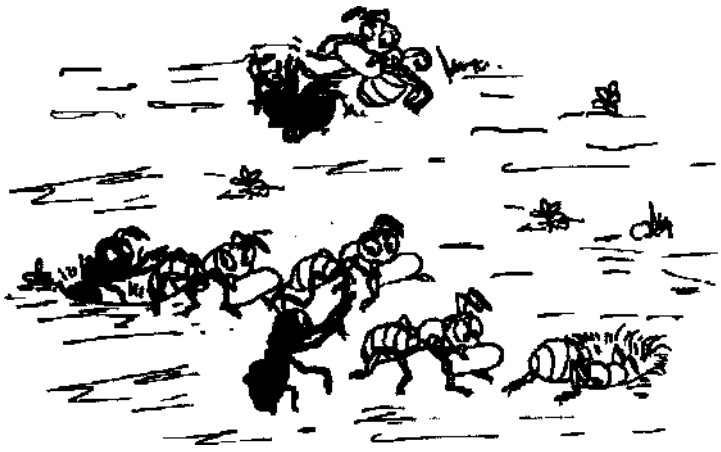
Phi/Ilium—the 'Walking Leaf is a really remarkable insect, found abundantly in the isles of the Indian Ocean. Nature has provided this gentle leaf-eater with an extraordinary kind of camouflage, which protects him from his enemies.

Phi/Ilium eggs look like tiny dried up spiny seeds and hence escape detection. The young insects which emerge from these eggs look very much like the reddish buds at the tip of branches. When they grow up, the adult body has the exact shape and colour of a leaf. Not merely the colour and shape but even the veins are duplicated. The legs are flattened and look like small leaves. They also have irregular ragged margins giving the appearance of leaves eaten by insects.

As though all this is not enough, when there is a breeze, the insects sway themselves in perfect imitation of the swinging leaves—so that even at close range it is difficult not to be deceived.

Slavery and Ants

Many species of ants keep slaves. *Polyergus*—the Amazon is an example. They hold in bondage the black Fusca ants. These slaves build their masters' nests, keep them clean, look after the young, bring food and feed everyone—in short they maintain the colony. The only thing the masters do, is to sally out twice or thrice a year on raids to bring in new slaves.



Before the raids, scouts are sent out. These report the location of Fusca nests. With the scouts to guide them, the raiders move swiftly in military fashion, with platoons at spaced intervals, to fall upon the unsuspecting Fusca nest suddenly. Before the savage attack the black ants flee. The attackers are interested only in the eggs and pupae and unless the Fusca tries to smuggle an egg or pupa out of the nest, when it is torn from limb to limb, it is not pursued. The Amazons turn home with eggs and pupae.

These are raised in the Amazon nest and the Black ants that emerge take over all the work cheerfully—even the grooming of their masters. The Amazons are so used to being attended upon even with food in front of them, they would die of starvation, if there were no slaves to feed them!