

Chapter 6

Mount Shasta and the Mystery of Mu

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I had a window seat on a commercial flight over northern California when I first saw Mount Shasta's intriguing cone. Of course, I immediately thought that it would be cool to collect butterflies on this large dormant volcano. I am a lepidopterist, after all.

A month later I was at Mount Shasta. My wife Janet, an entomologist herself, had let me talk her into combining a family camping foray with a research trip to collect tortricid moths. I was a newly appointed assistant professor at UC Berkeley, and my colleague Jerry Powell had recommended a couple of sites in the area for spruce budworm moths. My field notes say that we arrived at McBride Springs National Forest campground, on the southwestern slopes of Mount Shasta, shortly after 5 p.m. on August 8, 1996. I write field notes so that I don't forget the important stuff. It also keeps things real. That's needed at Mount Shasta.

But now we were all hot and tired. It was a 5-h drive through the blazing Central Valley, the only air-conditioning in our tiny Nissan Sentra being an open window. Our two boys, aged 5 and 7, had reached their limit. They were packed in the backseat like sardines, camping gear stuffed all around them. And my dear, ever-supportive Janet was 6 months pregnant. This was as far as we were going to go today. End of discussion.

Fortunately, we arrived to an empty campground, with level sites and a bit of shade.

Oddly empty.

We were expecting motorhomes. But it was a Thursday, and Janet pointed out that it was also the first time I had actually left work early enough in the day to beat the traffic. So, we drove around the campground circle, paused at the entrance a second time to make sure that there were no restrictions, and picked a nice site. Soon the groundsheet was down and we were in the midst of trying to assemble our brand new REI dome tent.

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Within minutes, another car started slowly around the campground circle. I silently congratulated myself on our early arrival, which let us get a good spot. But the car stopped at our campsite; two lean and leathery men in an otherwise empty vehicle. One stuck his head out and shouted, "You hear about the mountain lions?"

"What?" I was confused. I must have heard him wrong.

"Yeah, there was a mountain lion right here yesterday. And they're going after dogs down in the valley. Careful with your kids. You better leave."

"Gee, thanks for letting us know!" That was all I could think of saying as I walked toward the car to find out more. But the driver stepped hard on the gas, and they were gone.

Oh damn! Better pack everything up and look for another campground, far down the road. No sense in risking my family with a hungry mountain lion. One had recently taken down a jogger in central California. I knew the danger was real.

And yet, something was not right. Why did those Good Samaritans leave so abruptly? Why was nothing posted at the campground entrance? Why did they creep along the road so slowly as they came into the campground? But maybe I was rationalizing because I was tired and just didn't want to pack everything up again. From a basic cost-benefit analysis, it was simple. Just get out.

Janet and I talked about it. We reasoned that we would be wedged between trailers soon anyway, with beer-fueled discussions, throbbing generators, and bright lights across the campground. Why leave? And until the other campers arrived, we would do what we always did on our walks in the Berkeley Hills, surrounded by heavy fog as the little ones pretended they were in Tolkien's Mirkwood. Just keep the kids close to us and stay alert. We did the same on Berkeley and Oakland streets, where there was a sizeable population of homeless people, many of them undeniably mentally ill. And I have to admit that I get stubborn and defiant when I'm feeling pushed around, whether by people or predators. We decided to stay.

Then the boys started to squabble, as kids do. They needed to burn off some energy. So, we had to explore our surroundings, which I always do anyway at new campsites. Janet stayed with the car. Off we went, down an interesting path through the scrub, me sternly reminding the boys to carry a stick and to stay close. Would you have done that? Maybe not. But I doubt you grew up as I did, roaming freely through forest and swampland. I want the same freedom for my children.

The boys and I took our time exploring the incense cedar and white fir, getting several hundred yards down a dry trail and into long needle pines. Suddenly, I noticed something far out in front. I told the boys to get behind me, as calmly as I could, and tried to listen. I saw it again, a large tan-colored shadow among the trees, coming quietly and quickly toward us. It would be futile to run back up the path with two little kids; all the official descriptions of wildlife encounters say that just invites an attack. Heart thumping, I started to whistle and tried to consider whether a mountain lion could be most effectively disabled by jamming the wire rim of the net down its throat or by poking the end of the handle into its eye. Hmmm—I needed a backup plan. I picked up a fist-sized rock.

"Daddy," my 5-year old whispered behind me. I ignored him.

Again, more insistently, "Daddy."

I shushed him. This was certainly no time for discussion. There was a large dangerous animal bearing down on us.

But he wouldn't shush. Next came his loudest whisper, "Daddy, she's not wearing any clothes."

In a moment, I saw it was true. A tall suntanned woman with long blonde hair emerged from the trees, wearing nothing but sandals. I quit whistling, feeling foolish. She strode toward us with the fluid motion of someone who spent her life covering ground. I dropped my rock behind me, hoping she didn't see it, and shifted my grip on my net to look less threatening. She kept coming. I forced myself to politely look up at her head, not her chest. Her age was hard to guess, maybe 40. A few more steps and she reached us. I mumbled hello, and moved aside. She nodded and carried on with no discernable change in pace or facial expression. A few steps and she was around the corner and gone. My oldest son giggled.

Janet had a good chuckle when the boys and I got back. Naked hippies were not such a big deal. Back home, the boys had already watched more than one official How-Berkeley-Can-You-Be Parade, with its bizarre selection of nudists, nuts, and ninjas. Besides, this one was too sensibly shod to be crazy. And surely a calm, lone, local hippy indicated that mountain lions were not a concern. We wondered where she was heading, as she certainly wasn't staying at our campground.

It was just as well that we were feeling calmer about cougars that evening. Not a single other camper came to use the campground. I still think that's odd, considering how well populated every other campground was on our trip. Nonetheless, I put the thought aside and focused on the main reason we came to Mount Shasta. I put up two black lights on opposite sides of our campsite and checked them regularly until midnight. My family told me that they slept soundly, including when I crept quietly into the tent, bringing a big hunting knife with me. I barely slept.

In the morning, we asked the campground garbage pickup crew about mountain lions. They said there had been no incidents or sightings anywhere near there.

That day we drove further up the road to the mountain, climbing up an avalanche chute to about 9000 ft elevation. Numerous *Hemileuca* moths sailed past and I caught one for my PhD student Dan Rubinoff's thesis project while I scouted out better sites to place a black light. We convinced ourselves that the guys who warned us about mountain lions were just trying to discourage us from staying because there was a camp with nudists in the back country. It was not apparent where they parked their cars, though.

That evening, Janet and the boys stayed back at the campground, which finally had a few people occupying other sites. I drove our car up a road that angled up the southern slope of the mountain, stopping at Everitt Vista Point. It had a long parking lot where I set up my black light and sheet at a panoramic spot. I caught a number of tortricid moths that evening, some in old-style cyanide bottles and others in clear vials on ice for DNA extraction back at the lab. But the evening had another memorable surprise for me.

It started in the gathering darkness, with my black light already up and the white bedsheet behind it reflecting its light into the night. First, a car drove in and parked on the far end of the lot, then several more until there was a tight cluster. About a

dozen people emerged in unison, conferred for a few minutes and started walking straight toward me. Big people walking fast, some of them carrying sticks and others carrying lights. They marched purposefully toward me as a group, while I silently rehearsed what I would say when they got to me.

“Hi, I’m just collecting moths for a research project. Yes, I do preserve a few of them, but they don’t suffer. Really.”

No, that was too defensive.

Or perhaps just “Hello, how are you?”

That seemed too calculatedly oblivious.

But by now they were almost upon me. I gripped my butterfly net firmly. Twice in 2 days.

Then 20 ft from me, without a word, the whole group turned sharply and plunged off the edge of the pavement onto a dark trail. It was a narrow, difficult path, and I heard the clattering of rocks and shoes for many minutes, ever more distantly. This was strange. They seemed fully clothed. But it was hard to be sure in the dark.

Suddenly, I heard a long, desperate cry. The sound echoed far up a gulley, and then the darkness was rent again a bit closer to me. Frantically, I tried to decide what to do. Should I take down my black light immediately? Or should I leave it there and drive as fast as I could to the nearest town? But I didn’t know whether to report a mountain lion attack or a brutal ritual murder.

I know it sounds crazy. But I’ve been chased off a ranch in Colorado, shotgun pellets plinking all around me as the rancher tried to “get my attention.” He later said he was taking no chances after finding that the previous trespassers on his land, just a few days before us, had ritually slaughtered a group of his cattle. But I digress.

This evening, those spine-tingling, drawn-out cries became two, then four, then a whole choir of voices echoing down the mountain. In a moment, eeriness transformed into ethereal. Breathtakingly beautiful singing filled the pitch black night for the next hour, with clear tones carried on the fresh mountain air, a memory that I’ll carry for the rest of my life. And a mystery.

I tried to turn to the moths attracted to the ghostly sheet behind my black light, but I was too enthralled and mesmerized by the concert. Then, the night fell silent. Several minutes of rattling rocks marked the group as they returned, the first ones emerging suddenly beside me. Not one of them stopped or even turned their head as they silently passed my black light. They all seemed to have much weightier things on their minds, striding one by one to their cars and immediately driving off.

I did collect a few moths. They ended up being used in five different PhD theses: two in Berkeley and three in Alberta. Their DNA sequences have been deposited in GenBank many different times. In their own way, these fine nocturnal insects have become immortal. And their collection data are indelibly associated in my mind with a symphony of soulful sound that begged for an explanation.

We got back to Berkeley a few days later, still pondering our experiences at Mount Shasta. Just a bunch of hippies—that was the consensus from all the people I asked. So, I kept asking. Eventually, I told my story to Doug Kain, who had just finished a PhD project in my lab on the population genetics of Lyme-vectoring ticks. He had a wealth of experience that ranged from being a Vietnam war veteran to

working in Stan Prusiner's lab where prions were first discovered, and he had lived in Humboldt County long enough to appreciate the phenomenon of Mount Shasta.

Doug only laughed: "You just visited a portal to the Kingdom of Mu."

I had no clue. I looked at him grinning, assumed he was talking about sacred cows, and said: "Oh really? Like moooooooooo?"

"Oh no—like Atlantis. Mount Shasta has a gateway to a continent called Mu, spelled M U. It's really Atlantis and there are special caves there that let people in."

And here I thought Atlantis was off somewhere under the Atlantic. Now it was in California. I didn't believe him. But it was true. Just google "Kingdom of Mu" and you'll see it for yourself.

I'm a little unclear on the details, and there are contradictory stories out there on the World Wild Web. But it seems that there are secret Atlantean gardens under Mount Shasta that are tended by an advanced society of human beings¹. Some say they are 7 ft tall, and some say that they are small and only partially visible because they live in three and a half dimensions². They occasionally come out among us to dispense their immortal wisdom. Apparently they mostly wear white robes, but I'll bet that sometimes they don't wear anything, just like the long-limbed lady we encountered at the McBride Springs campground. Or maybe her clothes were in another dimension. Fascinating stuff.

If you want to know more, you'll be happy to learn that the mysteries of Mount Shasta and Mu have been monetized. It started with a prospector called J. C. Brown who found a cave full of gold and crystals and other good stuff, although the town full of eager believers that he recruited were not so happy when he disappeared. Now you can donate (credit cards only, please) to a global organization called Telos that gives tours to the portals to Mu³. You can also buy guided meditations from the same group, at \$25 for a set of two CDs⁴. The part I'm most curious about is the "beloved little booklet" in which Angelo the cat speaks to the people of the planet. I wonder if Angelo is a mountain lion.

Anyway, it seems that in 1894 Fredrick Spencer Oliver published a book that described how survivors from a sunken continent called Lemuria are living in tunnels under Mount Shasta. Surely, they sing beautifully too, and if you are really lucky, you can catch their concerts at the Everitt Vista Point. Of course, this is not a static culture. For example, the name Lemuria is now often shortened to Mu. Very elegant and simple, as befits a sophisticated race, don't you think?

The name Lemuria, it turns out, can be traced to the biogeographer and ornithologist Philip Lutley Sclater, a contemporary of Darwin, who in 1864 hypothesized a land bridge connection between Madagascar and India, explaining why lemurs are found on both land masses⁵. His delimitations of zoogeographic regions continue to be used with little change, but his concept of Lemuria has been taken over by

¹ <http://atlanteangardens.blogspot.ca/2014/04/secret-city-under-mount-shasta.html>.

² <http://www.lemurianconnection.com/category/about-mt-shasta/>.

³ <http://www.lemurianconnection.com/category/about-mt-shasta/>.

⁴ <http://www.mslpublishing.com>.

⁵ [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Lemuria_\(continent\)](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Lemuria_(continent)).

a delightfully eclectic array of other social forces. These range from writers about the occult to Tamil nationalists, who associate Lemuria with ancient greatness now sunken somewhere beneath the Indian Ocean, the Pacific Ocean, or Mount Shasta. All I can say is that this makes for great tangents in my class lectures on biogeography. I wonder if Sclater would be shocked or amused if he were to come back to life to see how his concept of Lemuria has evolved and speciated.

Since I am on the subject of the transmogrification of words, I would be remiss if I didn't point out that this cultural process occurs so rapidly that my experience at Mount Shasta already falls into a different time stratum. I recently told my story to a group of students and used "cougar" instead of "mountain lion" to describe the large predatory creature that I was worried about before encountering a nude woman. They burst out laughing, then had to explain to me that a cougar is an older woman dating a younger man. So were the two guys in the car just playing a joke on me about a human "cougar"? Not likely. Our encounter happened 3 years before the first recorded use, in 1999, of "cougar" in its new social connotation⁶.

Life as a lepidopterist is full of these kinds of rich and crazy experiences. A brief sighting of an intriguing mountain turns so easily into a trip down rabbit holes of the human imagination, past and present, where I can combine the personal with the professional and still get paid. And almost 20 years later, I can proudly say that my family and I are still exploring piquant paths, predators be damned (Figs. 6.1 and 6.2).

Fig. 6.1 Our two sons, Bill and Ed, on the upper slopes of Mt. Shasta, August 9, 1996, where they helped me chase after *Hemileuca*. It did not occur to us to look for lost civilizations in caves



⁶ <http://www.thestar.com.my/story/?file=%2f2007%2f10%2f17%2flifefocus%2f19059904&sec=li32fefocus>

Fig. 6.2 Me demonstrating lepidopterological focus at a black light sheet on my Berkeley balcony a couple of years after our Mt. Shasta foray. Bill stands guard with a net, while our third son, Andy, is wondering why mom is laughing as she takes the picture



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Prof. Felix Sperling has been fascinated by Lepidoptera ever since he found a Glover's silk moth on his way to school in 1966. His focus soon shifted to trying to determine how many species were represented by the swallowtail butterflies at his parents' farm at Bragg Creek, Alberta. His interests have since expanded to understanding species' boundaries, population genetic processes, and phylogenies in a variety of arthropods, but particularly North American butterflies and moths. He received BSc and MSc degrees (with George Ball) from the University of Alberta, and a PhD from Cornell University (with Paul Feeny), and was a postdoc at the University of Ottawa. He was a professor with the University of California at Berkeley before taking advantage of the opportunity to return home to Alberta as a professor in 1999. Of the more than 50 students and postdocs that Felix has mentored over two decades, most of them have stable teaching and research positions at universities and museums around the world.