

‘without wings, without legs, without eyes, wallowing well pleased in the midst of a mass of excrement,’ as the author Henry Mayhew described.

Flies carried bacterial gastroenteritic diseases and were the cause of significant infant mortality in the late nineteenth century in the absence of good sanitation.

The prospect of invasion by the damaging Colorado potato beetle provided impetus for the development of economic entomology in the UK, and, as political and scientific agendas clashed over the issue, Britain’s first official agricultural entomologist’s post resulted from this situation. Police stations carried pictures of the beetle in the UK up to the 1960s alongside wanted, suspected criminals. Although the beetle didn’t produce the problem in the UK originally feared, it raised the spectre of insect pests.

The book also highlights some early entomological pioneers. The wealthy Eleanor Ormerod applied her interest in the discipline by assisting — without payment — various agricultural bodies, including the Royal Agricultural Society, with her expertise. Her role in introducing the large-scale introduction pesticides to kill insects damaging crops was a critical step in the establishment of the field of economic entomology.

Clark also records the activities of the entomologist Harold Lefoy at Imperial College, London. Lefoy founded Rentokil, the pest control company, and may have been one of the first ‘research entrepreneurs’. But on 10th October 1925, he was overcome by fumes while experimenting on a gas of his own invention, and never enjoyed the profits of his company.

The development of medical entomology, too, is explored. It largely evolved from parasitological studies, and early reports in the field generally came from medical doctors who lacked insect knowledge. In 1877, physician Patrick Manson claimed that the filarial worms responsible for elephantiasis were transmitted to humans when drinking water that was infested with mosquito eggs: he had failed to observe the transmission of the parasite during the insect blood meal. Understanding of insects was becoming a serious business.

*Bugs and the Victorians.*

J.F.M. Clark. Yale University Press.  
ISBN: 9780300150919

## Web wonders

David Attenborough, the veteran natural history television presenter, launched last month the BBC’s first major step in putting the vast archive of its famed natural history unit online.

The service ‘Wildlife Finder’ is supported by extensive background information on habitats and species. It is hoped the site will reflect not only the diversity of environments but also the amount of work produced at the BBC’s natural history unit in Bristol, which has been making programmes for the channel for more than 50 years.

It includes Attenborough’s famous forest encounter with a lyrebird as it mimicked the sound of lumberjack chainsaw gangs and the noise of car alarms. And also his interaction with gorillas in central Africa. “There is more meaning and mutual understanding in exchanging a glance with a gorilla than any other animal I know,” he said.

Describing the blue whale, the largest animal on the planet, he said: it is “30 metres long and weighs over 200 tonnes. It’s bigger than the biggest dinosaur. Its tongue weighs as much as an elephant, its heart is the size of a car and some of its blood vessels are so wide you could swim down them.”

Another famous film is that of a tiger. Attenborough remained silent for much of the sequence when he came face to face with the animal. He interrupted images of the animal hunting only to explain its demise from being one of the planet’s top predators to one of its most endangered species.

Fresh clips are being uploaded to the site and by early next year 3,000 clips will be available for viewing, along with audio recordings, and users will be able to search by species or habitat.

George Entwistle, the BBC’s controller of knowledge commissioning, describes Wildlife Finder as the BBC’s first experiment in putting its archive online. “The web has totally changed how we can link together information, connect people and reach audiences in an on-demand world,” Attenborough says. He has selected some of his favourite clips. For him they represent “a snapshot of the incredible diversity of life on earth”. And at the human level he includes clips from a programme he made on Easter Island. He tells of a society which descended into warfare and died out as its natural resources dwindled. “Surely we have a responsibility to leave for future generations, a planet that is habitable by all species.”

Nigel Williams



**Natural histories:** The BBC’s new web archive will provide valuable material for those looking at the change in habitats and species. (Photo: John Sparks/naturepl.com)