

Curator says bugs aren't just pests

Summer trips supply museum with insect exhibits

By Larry Peirce
Staff Reporter

Like Indiana Jones, Brett Ratcliffe is always searching for items for museum exhibits. But for Ratcliffe, the most beautiful treasures are insects.

The results of his insect-collecting adventures will be shown this Sunday at Morrill Hall at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln.

For the last 20 years, Ratcliffe has been curator of insects at the University of Nebraska State Museum, where part of his job involves trips to the tropics.

These trips aren't average tourist excursions.

"We come as close to Indiana Jones as you can get," he said. "Just traveling the roads of Central America is dangerous."

He said a good trip will result in about 20,000 insects for the museum's collection. The museum's Division of Entomology contains about 1.75 million specimens from around the world.

Ratcliffe's longest stay in the tropics was two years in the Amazon River Basin in Brazil, where he worked with Brazilian entomologists. Every summer for the last 14 years, Ratcliffe and other scientists have traveled to the tropics of Central and South America to collect insects.

Sunday's program, called "Insects: Fact and Fancy," will be presented by the museum from 2 to 4 p.m.

Visitors will be able to talk to the scientists, handle the insects and watch cockroach races.

Another feature of the program will be

something called the exotic "oh, my" collection.

"It is a collection of very large, very beautiful insects and spiders from the tropics," Ratcliffe said. Many fancy insects live in Nebraska, but because they're not very large or very spectacular in color, they're easily overlooked, he said.

Ratcliffe said the tropical insects in this collection are "bigger and more gaudy."

Ratcliffe said the Madagascar hissing roach, which grows to about 3 inches long, is a good example for the program. The insect's size makes it easy for people to see and learn about insects' body parts, he said, and it doesn't bite.

Ratcliffe said Costa Rica is an excellent place to hunt insects because 10 percent of the land is saved for national parks.

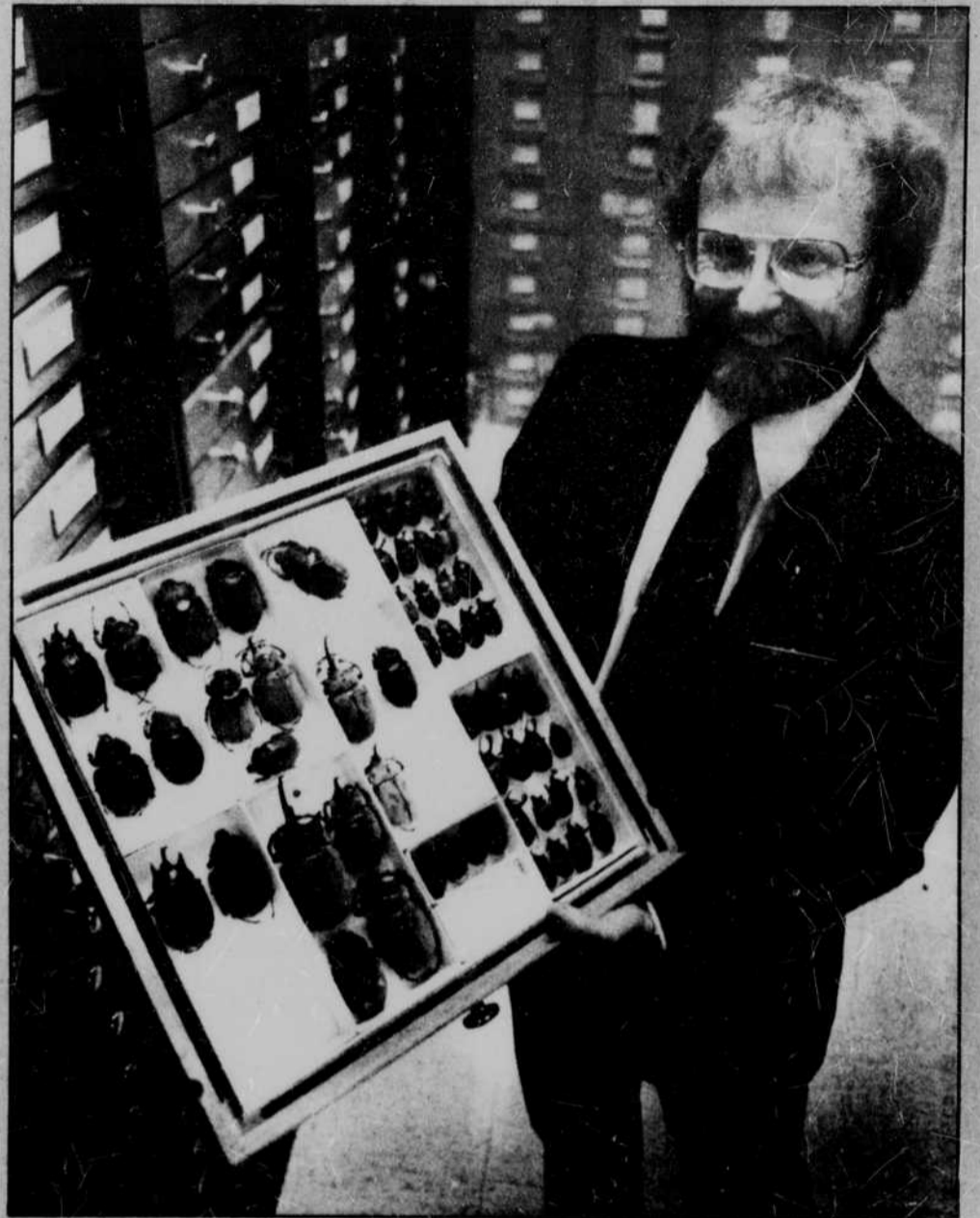
Costa Rica takes care of its tropical rain forests, he said. Ratcliffe said when rain forests are destroyed, habitats for animals and insects are lost.

"We're losing species of insects before we even discover them," he said.

Ratcliffe said the continued clearing of rain forests for lumber and cattle grazing could have tragic consequences.

In some heavily populated countries, he said, the dung beetle has a vital role in feeding on human and animal waste. Some developing nations don't have modern waste-disposal facilities, he said.

"It's been said that in underdeveloped countries... if it weren't for the dung beetle recycling human waste into the soil, within a year's time India would be knee-deep in shit," he said.



Doug Carroll/Daily Nebraskan

Brett Ratcliffe and some of the insects he collects.

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5:10 **A NEW LIFE (PG13)**
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PLAZA 4
12TH & P 477-1235

5:00 **THE SEVENTH SIGN (R)**
7:00-9:00

5:30 **BILOXI BLUES (PG13)**
7:30-9:30

5:15 **THE FOX AND THE HOUND (G)**
7:15

9:15 **SHOOT TO KILL (R)**

5:45 **18 AGAIN (PG)**
7:45-9:45

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1 **THE SEVENTH SIGN (R)**

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7:30-9:30

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