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ORGANISMS DIVERSITY & EVOLUTION

INTRODUCTION

A tribute to Michael L. May

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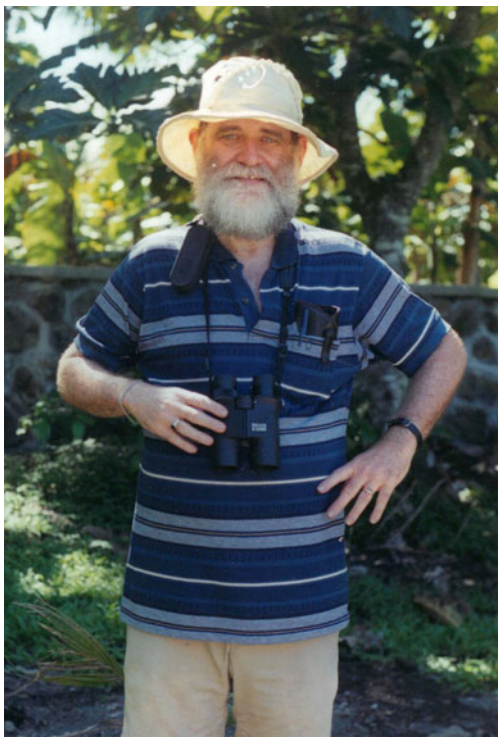

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Like many children, Dr. Michael L. May grew up collecting insects, keeping them in various sized jars in his bedroom. Growing up in Gainesville, Florida, gave him access to some spectacular insects. He fortunately had the support of his family, an essential element if the "bug phase" isn't stamped out early. As an example of his family's support, consider that when Mike grew up in Florida, DDT trucks would routinely drive down the street spraying insecticide, and his mother, father, and siblings dove for his jars, protecting them for Mike by hiding them under his bed until the DDT cloud had passed. By the time Mike graduated high school he had an extensive butterfly collection and was looking for what to do next. Luckily, his childhood friend and neighbor's father, Dr. Minter Westfall III, was a university professor at the University of Florida—an entomologist. Even better, he was hiring an assistant to help him in the field with what was to become Mike's lifelong passion: dragonflies and damselflies (Odonata). He began working

for Minter Westfall in the early 1970s and went on to graduate school where he worked on thermoregulation in Odonata, light signaling patterns in fireflies, and other entomological pursuits under the advisement of Dr. Brian McNab, gaining his Ph.D. in 1974. Following graduate school, Mike was a postdoctoral fellow at the University of Florida and from January to September 1974 at the Smithsonian Tropical Research Institute (STRI) on Barro Colorado Island in Panama.

Mike started at Rutgers University, in New Brunswick, in 1978, hired to focus on behavior—in beetles. Luckily for Odonatology, dragonflies and damselflies became Mike's main research area, where he published seminal works on thermoregulation (e.g., May, 1976; May, 1981; May, 1982; May and Casey, 1983; May, 1995a, b; May 1998), phylogeny (e.g., Brown et al., 2000; May, 2001; May, 2002; O'Grady and May, 2003; May, 2003; Ware et al., 2007; Carle et al., 2008), behavior (e.g., May et al., 1986; May, 1991; Baird and May, 1997; May and Baird, 2002; Corbet and May, 2008), morphology (e.g., May, 1995), and identification (e.g., Westfall and May, 1996; May, 1997; May 1998; Needham et al., 2000; May and Dunkle, 2007). Throughout his career at Rutgers Mike mentored several graduate students, but also opened his laboratory to undergraduates interested in biology, entomology, or any combination of the two. One former undergraduate, John Michalski, recalled,

> "in my freshman year at Rutgers University my academic advisor sent me downstairs to meet their "dragonfly man"—I had mentioned I collected dragonflies, along with all the other bugs I'd been chasing since I was a little kid…He was eating lunch at his desk—a peanut butter sandwich, if I remember correctly—and poring over some papers as he signaled me to enter. Long cardboard boxes, each about the size and shape of a loaf of bread, were scattered around the tiny room, some of them open, revealing rows of cellophane envelopes filed vertically like index cards."

Mike was well known at Rutgers as an enthusiastic professor of Insect Behavior and Structure and Function (insect morphology and physiology). He advised graduate students working on ants, mantises, grasshoppers, dung beetles, and, of course, dragonflies. Due to his humble, quiet demeanor, few students in the department knew of his national and international scientific stature.

Nationally, Mike was and is an active member of the Dragonfly Society of the Americas, a society of which he has been president. Former Ph.D. student Jessica Ware's first DSA meeting with Mike was in Iowa, shortly after she joined his laboratory for her Ph.D., just after publication of Mike's textbook, "The Dragonflies of North America: Needham, Westfall and May 2000." She was in awe at the line of people who followed Mike around to get him to autograph their copies: after all this was the most humble, clever, caring, soft-spoken professor in the department, and she had had no idea until she went to a national meeting how strong his reputation was. As John Michalski recalled of his first impression of Mike,

> "He was, at the time—this was 1982—pretty much as we know him today: amiable, soft-spoken, and heavily bearded…His deep Floridian accent—did Florida even *have* an accent? If so, Mike displayed one to a highly developed degree—and his casual demeanor instantly put me at ease"

Internationally, Mike was one of the founding members of the WDA, World Dragonfly Association, which he was president of in 2003–2004. He recently became the main editor of the International Journal of Odonatology, where his thorough yet thoughtful reviewing style has already inspired a renaissance within the odonatological community.

In the field, Mike is an excellent collector, and behaviorist. Unlike many professors, fieldwork didn't end once his tenure-track position began. Summer at Rutgers was signaled by the canoe tied to Mike's car rack, a sign that the dragons were flying. After speaking with his former graduate students, one gleans how special time in the field with Mike was, whether the insect sought after was a beetle, preying mantis, ant, or bug. Jessica fondly recalls wading with Mike in chest-deep water searching for migratory dragonfly larvae in Maryland, searching for *Oplogastra* under sky-high papyrus in Namibia, and was thankful that Mike never seemed annoyed when she routinely missed easy-to-catch things flying by.

Mike's excitement for entomology and collecting was infectious, and we all became better scientists through working with him. While some who don't know Mike may take his quiet demeanor as aloofness or disinterest, nothing could be further from the truth. He has always been a kind, thoughtful mentor, more than willing to sit through editing our sloppy early drafts of projects. He never made you feel inferior to the task before you, but rather gently guided the project to become better, stronger. As we have become faculty in our own right we know how tiresome the constant interruption of students can become. We don't know if Mike felt this way or not, but if he did, he never showed it, never rebuffed us for asking for help. On the rough days, weeks, or months that inevitably come with a Ph.D. dissertation, Mike was always there to provide support for his students and in his own, say "don't worry you *can* do this." That is the sign of a truly great mentor, and we are forever in his debt. John Michalski expressed what perhaps we all felt in noting that, "with Mike I found an outlet for my burgeoning field studies. Mike loved the outdoors too. Mike thought bugs were cool too. And Mike knew what it was to stand up to

your chest in cold river water, just to nab that glittering damselfly that wouldn't perch in a more convenient spot."

With all of this in mind, we dedicate this issue of *Organisms Diversity and Evolution* to Mike May. We have titled it "Of Dragons and Damsels," because he has spent much of his career, as mentioned above, working on dragonflies and damselflies, but one of the features that we all admire in Mike is that he is such a polymath of entomological knowledge. The breadth of his knowledge has always been a source of admiration among his students. We have tried to include a breadth of papers to reflect Mike's own varied interests. We hope this serves as tribute to a man we all admire and respect, and someone from whom we expect still more great science to come.