

ENTOMOLOGICAL TALES

The following story is taken from the diary of Richard D. Alexander, written in 1969 during a 15-month expedition to study the systematics of the crickets of Australia. The scientific results of the expedition are recorded in *The Australian Crickets*, Monograph 22 of the Academy of Natural Sciences of Philadelphia published in 1983. In this expedition the researchers drove a Land Rover 46,000 miles and discovered 378 new cricket species. These are but two of many adventures experienced during that year.

Range Bulls

Dan and I had an experience with range bulls near a water tank north of Alice Springs. We had stopped just past a low bridge over a dry river bed and walked back 50 yards or so to collect a cricket we had heard in passing. Cattle were bellowing in two or three directions fairly close by as we walked along, and I cautioned Dan, because of the number and sound of the bulls I could hear, to be on the alert for a quick return to the truck.

A few minutes later we knelt together behind a pile of dead logs and a clump of small trees in the center of the stream bed to dig out our cricket, when suddenly we both heard the low moan and subsequent intake of breath that is the warning signal of an angered bull. This ominous sound kept on coming from precisely the direction of the truck, and it seemed certain that the animal was stalking around and around the truck in his rage.

I began looking for trees and steep slopes, and said softly to Dan in the kind of Australian talk we often teased with when alone, "I think we may be in for a bit of strife." He agreed, and we ventured out cautiously. In a moment, however, the sound stopped, and we tried to find the animals responsible with our headlamps but failed. About this time I realized that two of the bulls we had heard from other directions were close enough to be a bother if we had to flee from the bull that had been by the truck, and this increased my uneasiness. Dan and I began carefully working toward the truck, moving faster and faster as we failed to see the animal we had been hearing until a final dash put us inside, somewhat relieved. We moved the truck back, much closer to the spot where we had been searching for the cricket, and went on with our work, keeping an apprehensive ear out in all directions. . . . We were really quite happy, though, to load up and drive away from there. When we did so, we came almost immediately upon the herd, with a big, lean, muscular red bull moving on our side, his head held low and his mood obviously hostile. This was the fellow making the noise that had originally spooked us. He watched us sideways as he strode across in our headlights, his flanks covered with dust thrown up from his fore hooves.

Shortly after we had returned from the Northern Territory the papers carried the story of a Mr. Wright who was killed by a range bull near

Larimah. The bull had turned on him during a loading operation and gored him until he died from loss of blood and liver damage. It is dangerously easy to become lackadaisical about bulls, mainly because they are so unpredictable.

On another occasion, after searching vainly for a reasonable campsite near the Mary River, which is set in the middle of terribly dry and barren country, we finally gave up and strung up our tarpaulin to provide the morning shade we always need to get our sleep after working nearly all night.

As luck would have it, we located ourselves almost directly on a major pathway leading through the arid country to the river, and this caused the wee hours to be a little more eventful than is usually the case. We hadn't been asleep long when we were treated to the hair-raising experience of being suddenly and simultaneously startled out of our sleep by an unbelievably low, long and beautiful bovine snort, produced by a wild bull practically on top of our camp. At that point, I learned that Dan, under stress, can exit his sleeping bag, mosquito net, and cot in approximately three-tenths of one second, although leaving the gear in something of a shambles. I think he left the cot so fast that it rose up and slapped him on the fanny on the way out. I couldn't decide whether I ought to be more worried about the situation than I was, so I just laid back and giggled at the spectacle of Dan standing at an apprehensive crouch in his shorts there in the moonlight, his hair in wild disarray, trying to stare down that cleanskin bull with a hand-held flashlight. As the snorting and pawing and circling and breaking into short sideways gallops continued, I finally told Dan that in case of any kind of rush he should be certain that he headed for the FRONT door of the truck, leaving the back door — nearer to me — completely clear, otherwise he would surely find himself lying bruised on the ground, with the door shut in front of him. Dan took this remark seriously, gauged his line of retreat carefully, and continued his confrontation, which must be judged a success, since the bull and his three or four companions finally skirted the camp and went on their way toward the river. Later during that same night we were similarly brought upright in our beds by a stallion screaming nearby and by a couple of terrifically loud grunt-fests by wild hogs.

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