

Small Wonders
by
Daniel E. White April 22, 2024

The ant carried something shiny, probably a small bit of foil, about the same length as itself. Down it went into a crack in the sidewalk and back up the other side, never breaking a stride. It seemed in a hurry.

A woolly caterpillar, the first our naturalist had seen this spring, undulated across the concrete path, omega-shaped to flat and back in no time at all, reaching the safety of the planted area to our right. The caterpillar would have T-boned the ant had it been any slower.

Five adults watched and marveled at the ant's strength and the caterpillar's agility. The whole scenario lasted no more than a minute. We were audience for a quotidian display of nature's wonder.

Days earlier, we were audience as one of our number revealed "The Secrets of Madera Canyon" to a group of volunteers in the Friends of Madera Canyon. The first of Dave's secrets involved ant lions and the way in which they dig holes to trap the ants they eat. Not just any ant; it has to be a specific species. Dave's students hadn't thought about insects creating traps like that. But then, they were in fifth grade.

Dave spent the first part of his talk sharing stories with which he engaged his 5th grade classes in the discovery of the natural world. A second story involved a fly that was attracted by the smell of mouse ears. (I asked; Dave did not know what scientist smelled the mouse ears to know their scent.)

Apparently, the blossom of the pipe vine plant smells like a mouse ear. The fly flies into the blossom, and the blossom then folds over itself to trap the fly. The fly wriggles around inside the blossom, covering itself in the process with pollen. In the morning, the blossom opens, and the fly is free to go.

Not being quick on the uptake, the fly flies into another blossom, and the blossom closes around it. The next morning, of course, the fly is released. In the meanwhile, the pipe vine blossom is pollinated. Imagine: pollinating by deception! Dave's fifth graders loved the idea. So did the audience of volunteers.

Then there was the hapless grasshopper story. There is a fungus that goes after grasshoppers, first infecting their lower body. Over time, the fungus works its way toward the grasshopper's head. Once there, the grasshopper's head explodes. Think how the idea of a grasshopper's head exploding would appeal to fifth graders.

When the grasshoppers swarm like they did last year, we will hope for a certain fungus to appear.

I complimented Dave after his talk for illustrating that the secrets of Madera Canyon are not just about which humans had done this or hidden that in the Canyon. Dave got us to think small and take our wonder from that.

I recently found an article by Alastair Humphrey, an Englishman in his late 50s who has made a career making adventurous trips, then speaking and writing about them. In 2012, he was honored as a National Geographic Adventurer of the Year. "I've Made Secret Discoveries on my Doorstep," was published in *The Guardian*, January 17, 2024. He is credited with inventing the term "microadventure."

When COVID shut down the world, Humphries "bought the Ordnance Survey map that covered where I live – 20km by 20km of a very ordinary corner of the world on the fringes of a big city in the south of England – and committed to spending a year exploring its modest span. Once a week I visited a single 1km grid square, chosen at random, and delved into the minutiae of every street, hill and warehouse I found. I tried to be enthusiastically curious about whatever I found, as I always am when I am abroad."

Humphries wrote, "Travelling around my unremarkable map for a year gave me much to remark on. It was one of the most interesting journeys of my life and shifted my perspective on the way we choose to travel. It made me calmer and healthier. It fostered feelings of curiosity, awe, gratitude and a deeper awareness of nature than I had experienced before. The more you look, the more you see. The more you see, the more you learn and care. Your local map is a fractal of the world at large. Embrace it, care for it, cherish it, and discover it. You might just find that a single map is enough exploration for an entire lifetime."

People of a Certain Age, we might be excused if we have thought that wonderful things are usually big, awe-inspiring, exuding grandeur. The Guinness clan has done well over the years by publishing a book of world records into which people are always trying to gain entry by doing something spectacular. (Their brew is another reason for their fame.).

The most, the biggest, the best; these become reasons to marvel, and to read the Guinness book. Humphries's year-long microadventure, reported in his book *Local: A Search for Nearby Nature and Wildness*, might make an interesting companion read to the Guinness book.

We five had a microadventure involving an ant and a caterpillar. Dave shared a series of microadventures on which he took his fifth graders.

Food for thought. What's in your single 1km grid square?

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