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Friday, May 08, 2009 Last Update: 10:24 AM PT



What Biology Tells Us, Or Perhaps Not

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This mad rush to reproduce is getting out of hand, don't you think?

First we had the New Sensitive Salmon. Now there's the New Sensitive Dung Beetle. Where will it end? With sensitive humans?

Don't bet on it.

Evolutionary biologists are fascinated with the ways creatures reproduce. This is because a biologist at Kansas State was caught typing "XXX" into a search engine in the biology lab, and ever since then biologists have been forced to hang around with fish and beetles.

Research, they call it.

First, ichthyologists discovered the New Sensitive Salmon, while trying to figure out why two types of salmon spawned in the same rivers in Oregon.

At least, that's what the ichthyologists said they were doing.

There seemed to be a big species of salmon and a little species. The big boy salmon would fight one another for the favors of a female, and the winner would get to make salmon babies with her. But the biologists never saw the little salmon fighting.

Pretty exciting stuff, if you're a biologist. Or a salmon.

It turned out that there was just one species after all, with two Mating Strategies. The little salmon's strategy is to hang around in the shallows until the big salmon are fighting, then waltz in and mate with the female while the big boys are busy. The little guys are the New Sensitive Salmon.

Now it turns out there are New Sensitive Dung Beetles too.

The always charming and informed Terry Gross interviewed entomologist Doug Emlen on her radio show this week. Emlen has devoted his career to studying how dung beetles do it. Dung beetles have enormous horns in all shapes - sometimes accounting for as much as 20 percent of their entire body weight. Emlen wanted to know why.

It's to fight over lady dung beetles, of course. The dung beetles do not gore one another with their horns, though. They use them to block passage to the female, whom the male dung beetle has stashed in a tunnel, and with whom - or with which - he is mating as often as he can. When he's not fighting with his big, scary horns.

The bigger the horns, the easier to guard the tunnel to the female. But it doesn't keep out the New Sensitive Dung Beetles.

The New Sensitive Dung Beetle is a little guy with hardly no horns at all. He won't fight. When a traditional, macho dung beetle drives him away from a hole, the New Sensitive Dung Beetle scurries away, whistling a dung beetle tune. Then he digs a tunnel of his own - right next to the big dung beetle's tunnel. While the big macho dung beetle is guarding his hole, the New Sensitive Dung Beetle takes a quick left turn, breaks into the other guy's tunnel, seizes the girl dung beetle in a transport of dung beetle ecstasy, then gets the hell out of the tunnel before the big guy knows what's happened.

My point in telling you all this is not that I envy the biologists who spend their entire lives on the frontiers of piscatorial and entomological pornography - though I do envy them. It's to point out that when it comes time to reproduce (and it's always time to reproduce) humans haven't got much farther than salmon and dung beetles.

Let me qualify that. What I mean, I think, is that when it comes time to reproduce, I personally have not got much farther than salmon and dung beetles.

I'm just not a fighter. So pardon me, boys. If you've been paying attention, you can wipe that smirk off your face right now.

Humans' Mating Strategies are no more evolved than those of the dung beetle. Let us consider a few successful human strategies of reproduction.

There's learning how to stay awake after consuming enormous quantities of alcohol. Cursory study shows this to be a successful strategy - though a little more study indicates that often when we employ this strategy, we may have to redefine the term "success."

Another successful strategy involves learning how to whang out three chords on a guitar. No one knows why this mating strategy is so successful, but it is, and the world has become a much more unpleasant place for it.

Another strategy for human reproductive success is to learn how to kick a ball around, or how to hit a ball with a stick, or to bounce a ball and throw it through a hoop, or to knock people down who are carrying a ball.

Why these stratagems make the human male a desirable object for copulation escapes me. I pay attention to the games, and all. I just don't understand that part. I lose interest after one side wins, the other side loses, and the interviews start.

But the game, apparently, is not yet over.

Ah, well. I've done all right with my New Sensitive Human strategy: reading books, holding doors open, trying to be polite. It doesn't always work, but then, I'm not as likely as some other guys to be knocked down by a 300-lb. bruiser just because I pick up a sports toy.

Not that it couldn't happen.

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