

PHASMIDA AND COLEOPTERA AS FOOD

by Phil Bragg (8737)

That well-known book *Why not eat insects* (Holt 1885) has been much talked about at several exhibitions and meetings which I have attended. However, I have yet to meet anyone in Britain who has personal experience of doing so! Even the author, to judge from his writing style, had never tried eating insects. Perhaps Dick Vane-Wright of the Natural History Museum has tried them — I didn't see the programme which was referred to in the October *AES Bulletin* (McNamara 1989).

Last summer, Patrick van der Stigchel, a fellow member of the Phasmid Study Group, accompanied me on a phasmid collecting trip to Sarawak. During the trip I had, on two occasions, the opportunity to try eating insects for myself.

The first occurred while we were staying at Bengoh, a Dayak kampong some 30 miles from the capital, Kuching. As phasmids are best collected at night, it seemed wise to hire a local to act as our guide while we were in the jungle at night. We were fortunate to be able to hire Bajing, who had spent all his life in Bengoh and also knew some interesting facts about the local phasmids!

Bajing told us that the villagers, who belong to the Bideyuh tribe, used to eat the eggs of the largest insects which we were collecting. These were later determined to be *Haaniella grayi grayi* (Westwood). The adult females are brown in colour but otherwise resemble the bright green "jungle nymph", *Heteropteryx dilatata* (Parkinson), which is commonly offered for sale at entomological exhibitions. The egg is barrel shaped, about 9mm long and 6mm in diameter; it is covered in fine hair. Evisceration of a dead specimen showed the body typically contains about 15 eggs in various stages of development.

Bajing said the usual procedure was to cut the female open, remove the eggs, boil them in water for 30 seconds, remove the shell and eat. As the aim of the trip was to collect live insects to bring back to the UK, I waited until an egg had been laid. After cooking, I found the shell was easily removed, and with some hesitation, I popped it into my mouth. They are actually a bit of a let-down, rather tasteless and chewy. O.K., but nothing exciting. Bajing said no one in his kampong eats them now. However, in the less sophisticated kampongs (Bengoh has electricity for three hours per night) I'm sure they are still looked on as a useful source of protein.

The second chance was eating Sago worms. I believe these are beetle larvae. They are found in the Sago Palms when they are cut down to harvest the sago. The worms are readily available from the Sunday

market in Kuching — they are rightly considered a delicacy. By request one of my hosts, Lee Yong Yen served them up one evening. They are purchased live and are stir fried in a hot wok, being thrown in while alive. After two or three minutes they are ready to eat. They are very sweet if cooked correctly but become bitter if overcooked. Eating the head is optional. I found the contrast between the crunchy, slightly bitter head and the sweet juicy body enhances the flavour. They are excellent — I'll make a point of having them again on my next trip.

I'm told you can eat the Sago worms live; bite through the tough skin and squeeze the contents into your mouth then discard the skin and head. Cooked ones are great. Raw . . . I'll leave it to you to try!

If you want to try Phasmid eggs I would suggest those of *Eurycantha calcarata* Lucas. They are a similar size and from a species which is easy to breed if you become addicted. I have a few *Haaniella grayi* in culture but I don't expect to open a restaurant for quite some time!

I wish to express my thanks to Virginia Cheeseman (entomological supplier) for providing the collapsible cages used during the trip.

REFERENCES

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