



Vivid Dancer Damselfly (Argia vivida)

Stalking the Wild and Winged

By Kerri deRosier Photographs by Bob Parks

As a visitor to the San Diego Natural History Museum, you've seen the insect photos taken by Bob Parks. You might remember his photograph of a monarch butterfly during the exhibition *Monarca: Butterfly Beyond Boundaries*. It was enlarged 400 times and emblazoned on a banner at the

Museum's entrance. His curious, dazzling green praying mantis appears ready to pounce from VIP passes, program schedules, and the Museum's web site.

Bob Parks is an insect photographer and self-trained entomologist, although he's not too comfortable with the title. He's traveled the world searching for things most people fear, loathe, squish, swat or ignore because they're too small to notice.

I first met Bob at Mission Trails Regional Park, where we walked along the Oak Canyon Trail. I had expected him to bring his camera, but he later told me that he likes to photograph by himself.

"It's like hunting and providing food for the table," he said. "If I don't get the shot, I have no one else to blame."

He did bring his spotting scope, however. As we were walking, he pointed out a blue dragonfly on the ground. It looked like a little blue neon stick. Then he set up the scope on his tripod and invited me to look.

What emerged through the lens was a brilliant, cobalt blue Vivid Dancer Damselfly with black stripes on its thorax, magnified to about 40 times its size. With the exception of its thorax, all of it was blue—even its mouth, which was shaped like the tip of a pair of gardening shears. Its black eyes seemed to be looking back at me. I was seeing a damselfly for the first time.

In that moment behind the lens, Bob had shared the reason for his work. "I want people to be aware of another dimension in the world," he said. "I'm like Georgia O'Keefe, who said 'a flower is a flower.' That's why I make them big."

Bob has been pursuing and studying insects for almost 50 years. When he was 13 years old, he found a sand wasp, and took it to the San Diego Natural History Museum for identification. That encounter was the beginning of what has become a life-long passion for insects, and a life-long relationship with the Museum.

After many more trips to the Museum, Charles "Harbie" Harbison (Curator of Entomology from 1934–1969) gave Bob access to the Museum's collection of insects and microscopes. Bob soon developed a knack for identifying the Museum's vast

collection. In the ensuing years, he would help identify the Museum's collection of bees and wasps.

In the late 1970s, he started volunteering in the Museum's Entomology Department, and later worked in the Museum's Operations Department.

Four years ago, you could say that Bob consummated his relationship with the Museum when he married Dee Parks, the Museum's Public Programs Manager. They exchanged vows under the huge Moreton Bay fig tree near the north entrance of the Museum.

For Dee, an experienced world traveler, life has been even more eventful since she married Bob. "I never thought I would find myself holding a tripod, keeping the alligators away, while Bob was photographing in Florida," said Dee. "We do some pretty bizarre things."

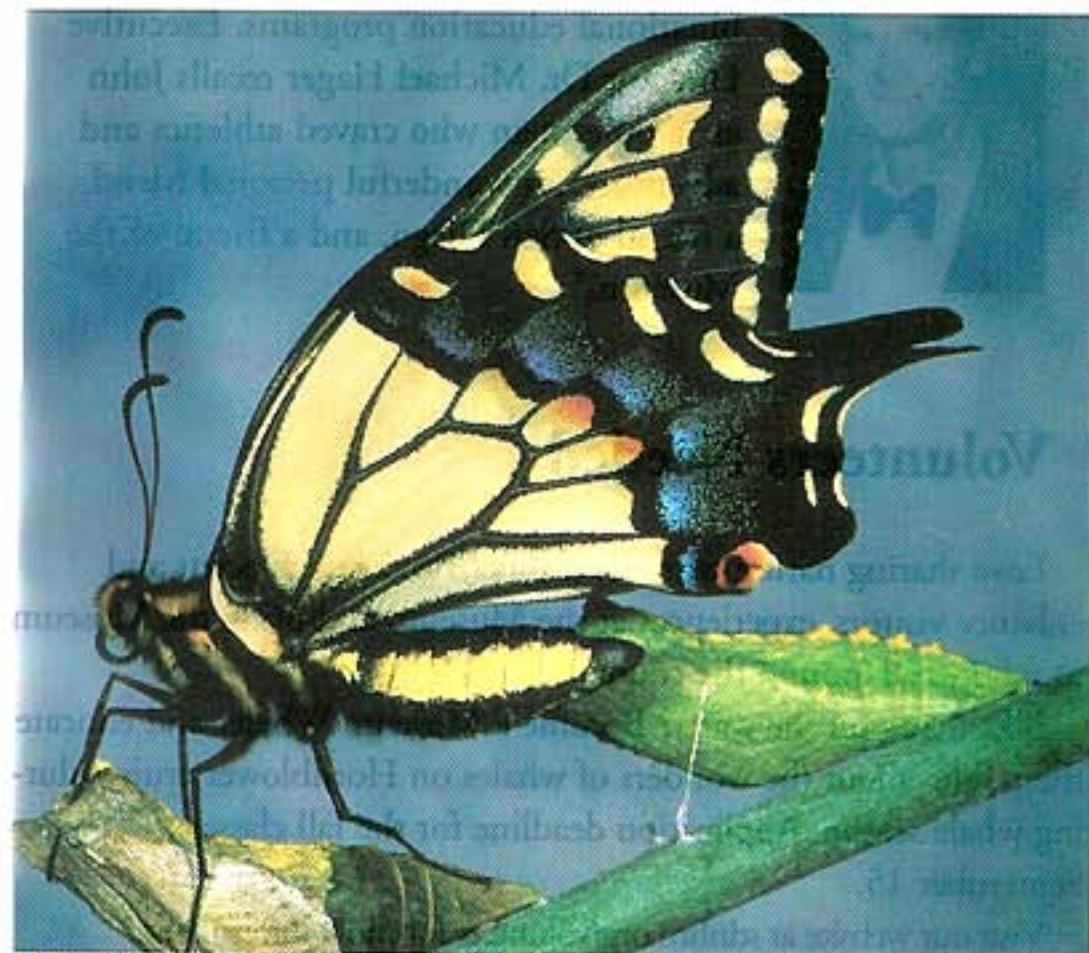
When Bob first started collecting insects, he collected with a net. "I collected 'em, stuck a pin in 'em, then put 'em in a box," he said. While he still sometimes collects specimens, his camera has replaced the net as his tool of choice.

Bob uses a Nikon F-5 camera with two flashes mounted on a Lepp bracket, a kind of U-shaped device with the camera in the middle and the flashes extended on adjustable 10-inch arms. (George Lepp, he noted, wrote for *Outdoor Photography*.) He uses a 105 mm lens for close-up shots, and a 200 mm macro lens when his subjects are far away. The result? Pictures that show the insect in intricate detail, providing a window to the bug's colors, textures, behaviors—even personality.

The bugs aren't always agreeable or cooperative, like the praying mantis that kept attacking his camera. On the flip side, he was asked to photograph a native tarantula rearing back in a defensive position for *Backyard Monsters*. "They get so docile, only the ones who are freshly collected do that," he said. "I never could get it to rear back."

The saying, "Do what you love, the money will follow" is a half-truth for Bob. Making money is not high on his priority list, but he

Anise Swallowtail (*Papilio zelicaon*)



Robber Fly (family Asilidae) with Dainty Sulphur Butterfly



is doing what he loves. “I just plain enjoy it,” he said. “I’ve always been quite content taking pictures. It’s also my escape. . .insects always gave me the greatest satisfaction.” Bob has a commercial driver’s license and takes on bus-driving jobs when he needs the money.

Not that he hasn’t made money on his photos—he has. He sold his first picture to *Ranger Rick* magazine 20 years ago. After that, he sold a back cover to *International Wildlife*, and got the second highest award in the California Academy of Sciences’ nature photography contest. He also won an award from the North American Butterfly Association, and received honorable mention in the Fall 2000 *Nature’s Best* magazine. His Desert Whitetail Dragonfly is on the cover of *Common Dragonflies of the Southwest*, by Kathy Biggs.

Still—he’d rather take pictures than enter contests and send query letters. “If it’s not fun, why do it?” he asks. “You can always find a way to feed yourself.”

With all of his knowledge of insects, you might expect him to be a university-trained entomologist. He’s trained himself with experience and books, and is just as familiar with a microscope as he is with a camera and binoculars. “He doesn’t have the degree, but there are very few entomologists with his experience,” said Dee Parks. “It’s because Bob studies it all the time.”

Bob and Dee share a small house on a busy City Heights street. The coffee table is scattered with nature magazines, and his work and artifacts from his wife’s many trips jockey for position on the walls and shelves. There’s his close-up of a butterfly wing, which looks like an aerial photo, the black areas of the wing doubling as winding rivers and lakes.

The bedrooms double as storage units for what he describes as an “astronomical” number of slides. “I’m not good at keeping track of them,” he laughs. “I have somewhere between 500 and 1000 magazine-quality images. The others are so-so.”

So what’s the difference between a so-so photo and a magazine-quality image? “To get good pictures, you have to know in advance where to find the insect. You have to know the behavior. You have to understand the subject.”

“Most of my pictures are not manipulated,” he said. “Some photographers freeze insects [before taking the picture]. That’s not cool. I want to show the animal the way it is—to my way of thinking, the best shots show behavior.”

Look for Bob’s photos in the Museum’s new exhibition *Backyard Monsters*. When explaining how he chose the photos, he said, “I tried to concentrate on bugs people would see themselves in their own backyards. I want people, especially children, to say, ‘I know what that is.’”

At 62, he says he’s ready to retire from driving buses. But he won’t be hanging up his camera any time soon. When asked about publishing a book of his images, Bob laughed. “A book would be a lot of work. I’d have to stop taking pictures.”

Bob’s photos have also appeared in *Dragonflies of the Southwest*, *North American Butterfly Association* magazine, *Nature’s Best*, *San Diego ZooNooz*, *San Francisco Chronicle*, and *The San Diego Union-Tribune*. His photos have been displayed at the Arizona Sonoran Desert Museum, and at the San Diego Natural History Museum.

For more information on the history of the Entomology Department—sdnhm.org/research/entomology/entotimeline.html