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The Sting Of The Wild



Synopsis

Entomologist Justin O. Schmidt is on a mission. Some say it's a brave exploration, others shake their heads in disbelief. His goal? To compare the impacts of stinging insects on humans, mainly using himself as the gauge. In *The Sting of the Wild*, the colorful Dr. Schmidt takes us on a journey inside the lives of stinging insects, seeing the world through their eyes as well as his own. He explains how and why they attack and reveals the powerful punch they can deliver with a small venom gland and a "sting," the name for the apparatus that delivers the venom. We learn which insects are the worst to encounter and why some are barely worth considering. *The Sting of the Wild* includes the complete Schmidt Sting Pain Index, published here for the first time. In addition to a numerical ranking of the agony of each of the eighty-three stings he's sampled so far (from below 1 to an excruciatingly painful 4), Schmidt describes them in prose worthy of a professional wine critic: "Looks deceive. Rich and full-bodied in appearance, but flavorless" and "Pure, intense, brilliant pain. Like walking over flaming charcoal with a three-inch nail embedded in your heel." Schmidt explains that, for some insects, stinging is used for hunting: small wasps, for example, can paralyze huge caterpillars and then lay their eggs inside so that their larvae can feast within. Others are used to kill competing insects, even members of their own species. Humans usually experience stings as defensive maneuvers used by insects to protect their nest mates. With colorful descriptions of each venom's sensation and a story that leaves you tingling with awe, *The Sting of the Wild*'s one-of-a-kind style will fire your imagination.

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Customer Reviews

A fascinating exposition on the evolution of the insect sting, by an intrepid scientist who has spent decades observing insects in their natural habitats on six continents. Author Justin Schmidt is best known for inventing the Schmidt Scale of Pain to measure the relative efficacy of insect stings, providing biologists with a basis for developing testable hypotheses about the evolution of insect stings. This account is packed with details about the lives of the six-legged fellow travelers we share the planet with. The blue digger wasp uses its stinger to paralyze a cricket, and then lays an egg atop its victim, which revives a few minutes later and crawls back into its burrow, whereupon the larva hatches out and eats its hapless host alive, thereby saving mom the trouble of digging a burrow for her little one. The dwarf honeybee has invented a remarkable method of defending itself against the depredations of the much larger giant hornet: hundreds of dwarf honeybees will cluster in a ball around the invading hornet and then vibrate their wings muscles to generate enough heat to cook their would-be attacker to death. We learn about the harvester ant, which boasts the most toxic venom of any insect (35 times more deadly than rattlesnake venom) and the dreaded "cow-killer" wasp, which escapes predation by means of a combination of its massively painful sting, its rock-hard exoskeleton, and its powerful legs, which it uses to escape the grasp of attackers.

This is a most enjoyable book, written by a scientist who really knows his stuff. Moreover, he loves his chosen research area. His fascination with the topic is more than evident -and quite contagious!- in every single page of the book. The author took me through a series of interesting tales based on the biology of representatives of a few types of stinging insects like bees, ants, and wasps. There was a little bit of something in this book for pretty much everyone. He talked about behavior, pharmacology / biochemistry, ecology, and evolution among many other topics. I loved his writing style, his prudent use of notes, and the nice set of references/further readings at the end of the book. This is good, because I was left wanting for more. Also, I liked that he minimized the scientific jargon without sacrificing accuracy but more importantly, he was not at all patronizing. This shows respect for the interested reader. Moreover, he is a natural storyteller; this is a rare quality that is

sadly absent in most popular science books nowadays. Dr. Schmidt is the inventor of the well-known stinging insects pain scale, but to him this was not a mere academic exercise, he came up with the scale directly from personal experience, by allowing (and sometimes encouraging) a wide variety of insects to sting him. Some have characterized his efforts as "crazy" and although I do not share that opinion, I must say that he is a braver person than most. I certainly would not engage in something like this voluntarily, you'll never know what you turn out to be allergic to. That being said, if you think Dr. Schmidt is nuts, wait until you read the story about another entomologist (Michael Smith, a grad student at Cornell University | BTW, where I got my PhD...

Not every reader will enjoy this book, but I found it witty and informative (could have used illustrations in the chapters describing groups, though). I found the funniest thing to be the appendix, which is a pain scale of various ants, wasps and bees, with a scale of 1 to 4 and a brief description. Here's one, about the bullet ant (South America): "Pure, intense, brilliant pain. Like walking over flaming charcoal with a 3-inch nail embedded in your heel." Schmidt has a 40-year career and has deliberately sought out stings in order to compare them. He seems to be rather legendary for his deliberate experience of stings. The book has a lot of autobiographical detail, so it comes across as almost journalistic in style. These personal accounts are of experience with stings, field work, childhood memory. Schmidt cannot cover every insect that stings, of course, but the ones mentioned are representative. The accounts include species behaviors, habitat and chemistry of stings--which are surprisingly complex. Some stings are deadly if enough sting a person, but the overall purpose of the venom seems to be like protective coloration, that is to warn off predators. And on an insect scale, sometimes to kill attackers or paralyze prey for its young. The book starts out with general background and some chemistry of stings. There's so much information that it's not easy to review. Here's some things that I found interesting, to give a flavor. The chapter on yellow jackets and wasps notes that given a choice of flesh, yellow jackets prefer venison, hare, fish and horse in that order; and that of a wasp-like insect is black, beware.

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