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Beetles Elegant, Attractive

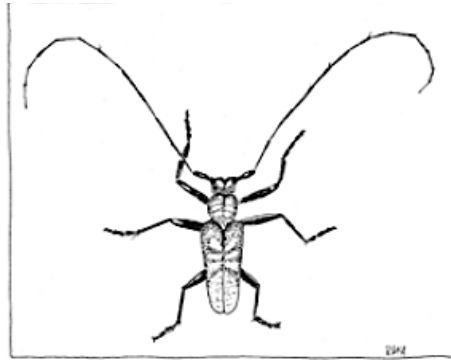
The long-horned beetles are a big family, with more than 26,000 species over the world. Here in North America we have 1,200 of them, so you would think we who also live here would know them quite well. Or maybe you would just think, "Beetles? What's so remarkable about them? They are small, kind of brown, live in the woods and under things. It's no wonder we don't know them or notice them."

Mostly we know the things that present themselves to us, one way or another. We know Japanese beetles because they are colorful and lots of us gardeners find them munching our pole bean leaves or rose bushes. Pretty as they are, they make us scowl when we see them. We have our own plans for those beans and flowers, and we have our reasons. Sometimes we make war on the beetles, sometimes we just groan.

The long-horned beetles, also called longicorns, make their living eating plants. Even so, some early entomologists have called them graceful, elegant. In 1915 Edward Step wrote, "The sensitive persons who ordinarily shudder at the sight of an insect make an exception here, for the unusual length and slenderness of the body, combined with the great length of the antennae, give the insect a graceful air that quite dispels the common prejudice against the race."

Certainly the members of this family, the Cerambycidae, are known for their very long antennae (they don't really have horns). There are some species in which the antennae of the males are four times the body length. The females' antennae in these species are twice the body length, and that is still quite unusual and long, also graceful.

In his book, Edward Step presents many a marvel. He tells of the musk beetle, *Aromia moschata*. "To the attraction of elegance of form and brilliance of colouring is super-added a delightful fragrance, which often causes ladies to forget their regulation horror of beetles and to wrap this species



Sawyer Beetle
(dark at over)

in their handkerchief or glove in order that they may retain its odour." (Marvels of Insect Life, McBride, Nast & Co., NY, 1915). Back in the day, this was a beetle known to ladies.

The long-horned beetles in my life have been the sawyer beetles, big handsome adults with graceful antennae. They lay their eggs in cracks and crevices of tree bark, and these hatch to become larval forms that are well equipped with great big mandibles and an elegance which is only subtle in the larval form. They chomp away into the wood of the tree, leaving big holes and one day they emerge and fly off in adult gracefulness. We know them well here, having met them in our firewood and in our red pine logs when we were skinning the bark off and building our house. Sometimes we see the adults around, but we know they are finished with our house which is still standing after forty years.

In the middle of July I met a new and gorgeous character. I was under the extended roof of the tool shed, where we keep the garden trellis poles, looking for just the right one. Something landed on my head and fell to my shoulder. I brushed it off and looked to the ground to see what it had been.

I think I need the prose of the 1915 naturalist to describe my amazement. There before me, scurrying very ably on its long graceful legs, was a creature such as I had never seen. Until this moment I could not have known what I had been missing, for there, in striking patterns of yellow and black, was an insect of some kind, dropped

into my life like a miracle, a gift, an awakening. My first thought was that this was some sort of yellow jacket, wasp, or bee. But it was much too big, about an inch and a half long, and it showed no inclination to flight, instead racing this way and that checking its path with dark antennae which seemed to emerge directly from its eyes.



Sugar Maple Borer
(yellow + black)

I settled down. I thought of grabbing it and running down the hill to show Joe, and then to look it up. But I couldn't bring myself to interfere with the life of this individual and I knew I'd seen it clearly and could look it up from memory. I let it dance off on its long legs, to rest awhile in the pile of poles before carrying on along its own plan.

I went right down to the house and looked it up. No problem: it is a sugar maple borer, one of the long-horned beetles. Never had I seen one in my life, and somehow I don't expect ever to see one again. I've talked to a few observant friends around here, tree people, and they've never seen one. I am the lucky one. And now that I know its name, sugar maple borer or *Glycobi-us speciosus*, I can see what others have written about it. An entomologist for the USDA Forest Service wrote in 2017, "The adult borer is an attractive black and yellow beetle." I learned some things about the larvae, about the damage done to young trees. There was no mention of ladies getting over themselves about beetles and bugs. — Bonner McAllester, *Monterey News*