

Chapter IV

Climbing to the Top of Hell In the Name of Science Noises From the Dark

There are two reoccurring themes in my varied adventures. One is more uphill hiking than downhill hiking, which my smart friends point out is impossible provided I start and end in the same place and hike all the way. I maintain that they are wrong, somehow my uphill climb is about 25% longer than my downhill shuffle. The other theme of my adventures is some sort of shoddily built or poorly enclosed tower that must be climbed. Why must it be climbed? Because its there.

So today we are following Yaw-Wen through the botanical garden and up a very tight trail to a little tower of blissful Hell. Two themes in one. We come to the tower on the top of a hill, the taller trees are cleared away and a bright red dragon, *Neurothemis*, is floating around, tempting me. Matt, Erin, and Chris go up first. There isn't much room so most groups limit their number to three at a time.

The tower is basically made of scaffolding and held up with guy-wires. Its very bare bones. Wonderful if you're not scared of heights, but the utter lack of anything to arrest your fall at the base of each stairway is a bit upsetting. I swat at a robber



Long way to the top



About half way up

fly and let others take their turn. There were at least 9 levels each about 7 feet heigh, so its not monumentally tall, but tall enough.

Finally everyone has gone and down and I will try my best. The first couple



Looking down on the world

release the grip of one hand, which turns from white back to a pinkish, and grab some other piece of railing. By the 5th or 6th level I'm stopped. Cussing, wanting to scream and cry at the same time, perfectly aware that this is madness- I'm in less danger than when I drive to Wal-Mart- I try to calm myself down, wedge myself in a corner and very carefully take out my camera for some shots, just incase I can't make it to the top. Which, of course, is not an option. The top must always be gained.

After sufficient picture taking I very slowly begin my ascent again. Finally, wanting to



Three at the top

curse, scream, and cry, my body hurting from the tension I make it to the top. Again I wedge myself in the corner and breath heavily. Presently Erin and Matt come bounding up, "Hey, how ya doin'?" Chipper bastards.

More pictures, more time to calm down. Then its time to leave this hell hole in the sky and get to solid, lovely, only 6 feet away, ground. I'm doing a butt scoot technique so I stay as low and stable as possible, making good time! Matt, about two thirds down accidentally drops his walkie-talkie. It clangs on the tower, but ultimately falls in the impenetrable scrub and grasses below. We finally make it to the bottom!

levels aren't bad at all, but by the third I'm hunching something terrible, and on the fourth I'm using a technique rock climbers use, you maintain three points of contact at all times. So I clutch at the bars with both hands and keep one foot firmly planted while I move the other foot. Then with one hand very tight and two steady, but somewhat shaky feet, I reluctantly

Hurray! Lovely ground! I could kiss it. By now I've forgotten most of my fear, it was a lovely view, nice breeze, I don't remember being scared or upset at all really, could positively run up those steps if I wanted to... but have to get back for lunch.



Nice View



The Research Station- Our quarters on the right, "the restaurant" on the upper left.

I had a slow walk back down the hill. It was nice, there were some particularly noisy birds along the trail, but even Victoria couldn't coax them out to be seen. I headed straight for the room and a shower. A siesta was sorely needed. But it wouldn't last long.

Matt used Erin's walkie, "Hello, hello, where are you?" and Chris replied, "Down the trail." Matt explained the situation of the lost walkie and Chris said he would help us look for it. So we turned off Erin's walkie and listened. Suddenly a tiny little voice came out of the grass, "Help me! Help me! I'm lost! I'm over here, in the bushes. Help me! I'm over here!" Matt doubled over with laughter, and I, perhaps not entirely over my previous experience wondered, How would Chris know where the lost walkie was? But, after Matt gained his composure a bit more he was able to rescue the lost.



Flower, perhaps the family Melastomataceae

Dr. Wu came back today to see how we were doing. He brought supplies. I put in an order for 3 mangos and 5 black tea juice boxes. Yaw-Wen was blown away by the size of the order, how could anyone drink 1.5 small boxes of tea a day!? So my order has arrived and Matt and I instantly devoured a Mango.

I had been eyeing a large black mass in a tree near the building ever since we got here. It was about basketball sized, perhaps a little larger, and about 9 feet up. I originally identified it as an aerial termite nest similar to the ones I've seen in Thailand, but Chris figures its an ant nest, and he is right. There are some beetles that are only found in association with ants, and the only way to collect them is from the nest. Now consider the challenge faced by the collector



Preparing for the attack



Wasp attacking an unlucky cicada

who wishes to poke through a nest of several thousand suicidal stinging biting ants in pursuit of the one, two, or possibly as many as five, small round unmoving brown beetles that may be found therein.

Luckily there may be a way. Its called floating. The idea is that in water living things, such as insects, float, while nonliving things, like dirt or nest material, sinks. So Matt and I got a trash can, a tub, some small dip nets, water, and a long handled machete-like implement with an inward curved tip. He pulled down the limb, hacked at the nest, which was made of a paper wasp nest like material, cut off a large

portion of the nest and drug it down the limb. I grabbed the nest, turned around and shoved it into the tub. In the three seconds it took me to do this I had about 200 ants on my hands and arms. They stung.

Matt came over and helped, mashing up the nest, swirling the contents of the

tub, the ants were swarming everywhere, climbing up our shoes and legs. An audience gathered and watched as we hopped and slapped, and went about our business. Finally we had two quart bags full of ants and hopefully some beetles. It took quite a bit of work, lots of scooping, swirling, and slapping. Lots of fun in the field.



Botanical Garden in the twilight

I took another shower, but I'm still picking ants off my clothes and backpack. Matt and I volunteered to postpone supper and set up the black light at the garden tonight. I left specific instructions for Victoria to bring the tea in the freezer with her along with my dinner. Hurray!



Hurray, another possible killer snake!

We got the black light set up and I experimented with some long exposure pictures of the gardens in the twilight. As the sun set the usual blacklighting tails began to be retold. We've gotten so many big metallic green June beetles we almost ignore them. People started trickling in, and enjoyed my dinner and tea. Matt and Chris drifted into the darkness and came back with another unidentified, yet much molested snake.



Photographing the Serpent

All of a sudden a sound, not unlike a helicopter, could be heard approaching. You will rarely use it, but you should always have a net at a blacklight. I sprung into action and after a lot of dancing, bobbing, and weaving finally caught the great beast. It was a huge male scarab beetle, like our unicorn or rhinoceros beetle. This one with a huge four forked nose piece and a double forked head piece was the biggest beetle caught so far.

Not as impressive, but very intriguing was a tiny little beetle that looked like it belonged to the family Elmidae or Dryopidae. These are aquatic families and there should be some in the pond. Perhaps tomorrow I'll spend some more time dipping.



Big Beetle