

“Hey Ken,” Glen called from across the road and parking lot. He was on his hands and knees in the parking lot next to the bath-house and under a large Douglas fir tree. I was fixing a faucet across the entry drive from the main lodge.

”Come and look at this,” he said, “There is a dead mouse here, and it is moving. I know he is dead because I took him from a trap in the bath-house and threw him here this morning. His head is crushed, he is bloated and stinky but he is moving.”

“What miracle of resurrection is this?” I thought, and I hurried across the driveway to see. The mouse was lying bloated and dead on the dry, hard earth beneath the fir tree. He was stinky enough, I agreed, when I got down on my knees to inspect him closely. Yes he was surely dead.

But sure enough if one watched for a minute or so the mouse would give a tiny jerk and move. The motion was always in the same direction, away from the trunk and roots of the tree.

We both got down and studied the mouse closely for a few minutes. Suddenly a beetle emerged from under the mouse and circled the mouse a time or two. It was shiny black, about $\frac{3}{4}$ of an inch long, and less than $\frac{1}{4}$ of an inch wide. It had a row of bright orange stripes on both sides and short antennae which caressed the mouse lovingly from time to time. After circling the mouse a time or two the beetle dived back under the mouse. We looked more closely and saw there were two of these beetles beneath the mouse.

Both of them wedged themselves beneath the mouse with their backs to the ground and their legs against the underside of the mouse. When they pushed, seemingly together the mouse would move a fraction of an inch. The beetles clearly had a plan and they seemed to know how to work together in moving the mouse.

Glen and I went about our respective jobs for the rest of the afternoon but we went back every 15 minutes or so to see what was happening. The mouse would be a few inches further along, further away from the tree each time we visited.

Over a period of about four hours, the mouse was moved approximately four feet from where Glen had thrown it, and it had reached the outer drip-line of the tree. The soil there was moist and fairly soft compared to the packed dry earth immediately beneath the tree.

When the mouse carcass reached the soft soil it ceased its overland progress but the beetles continued to work busily. It wasn't long until we could see that they were excavating the soil beneath the mouse and making a small berm of loose soil around the mouse. The mouse, meanwhile was sinking into the pit they were hollowing beneath it.

It took probably another hour before the top of the mouse was at ground level, and some minutes more before it was actually all below the natural ground level. The beetles then moved the loose soil of the berm and covered the dead mouse smoothly and completely. On our last visit to the

work-site the day was gone and it was about dark, the mouse was buried, the ground was smoothed over and the beetles were nowhere to be seen. If we hadn't observed the moving, we would not have known what became of the mouse.

I had heard of carrion beetles (or burying beetles, as they are sometimes called) and probably had studied them briefly in a biology class or two. I could hardly wait to do some more reading about them. This was no longer just some facts to read and wonder about. We had actually observed the whole thing—just like Henry Fabre.

There are many kinds of carrion beetles and they live nearly everywhere on the earth. They range in size from flea size to about an inch and a half in length. The beetles Glen and I watched were probably a male/female pair working together. They bury their find, lay their eggs in it, and often live underground feeding on the carcass for a week or two during which time the eggs hatch, the maggots mature and form pupae. In a few weeks the new adults emerge from their pupae and dig themselves out of the hole. The old adults retire and die, leaving the next carcass to their young and their successive offspring. The complete life span of adults in summertime is only about a month.

The scientific name of the pair we watched is *Necrophorus*, meaning bearers or carriers of the dead. If it weren't for these creatures and others like them, the landscape would remain littered with dead creatures stinking literally and befouling the land for weeks or months while they decompose. With the help of these creatures many carcasses disappear almost the same day they die.

How do they find the dead treasures they so love? The odor-sensing organs of these tiny insects are located in their feet. They can smell a dead animal from as far away as a mile, and it may take them several days of hard travel to reach a carcass they have sensed by its odor. Imagine crawling on tiny legs for a mile or more across very rough forest terrain! The late-comers may find that the carcass has already been taken and buried before they arrived. A very large carcass—of a rabbit, a skunk, a coyote or a deer is usually not buried but may become host to hundreds of pairs of these tiny creatures who lay their eggs and raise their families in the rotting compost.

Was this moving and burial an amazing feat or what? The task would have been roughly equivalent to Glen and me moving a dead elephant about 250 feet overland and then burying it using no tools, levers or engines--only our bare hands, feet, arms and legs. Would that even be possible? Probably not, even if our lives and the futures of our children depended on it.

One could observe this sort of thing at places other than DCC, but I can't think of a better place to see and experience this and many other great wonders of God's creation. These wonders are going on even right now, even as we speak.