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‘Extinct and Endangered: Insects in Peril’ Review: Breathtaking Bugs

This American Museum of Natural History exhibition of Levon Biss’s macrophotography prints makes us appreciate these small creatures’ beauty on a large scale.



Blue calamintha bee

PHOTO: LEVON BISS/AMNH

By William Meyers

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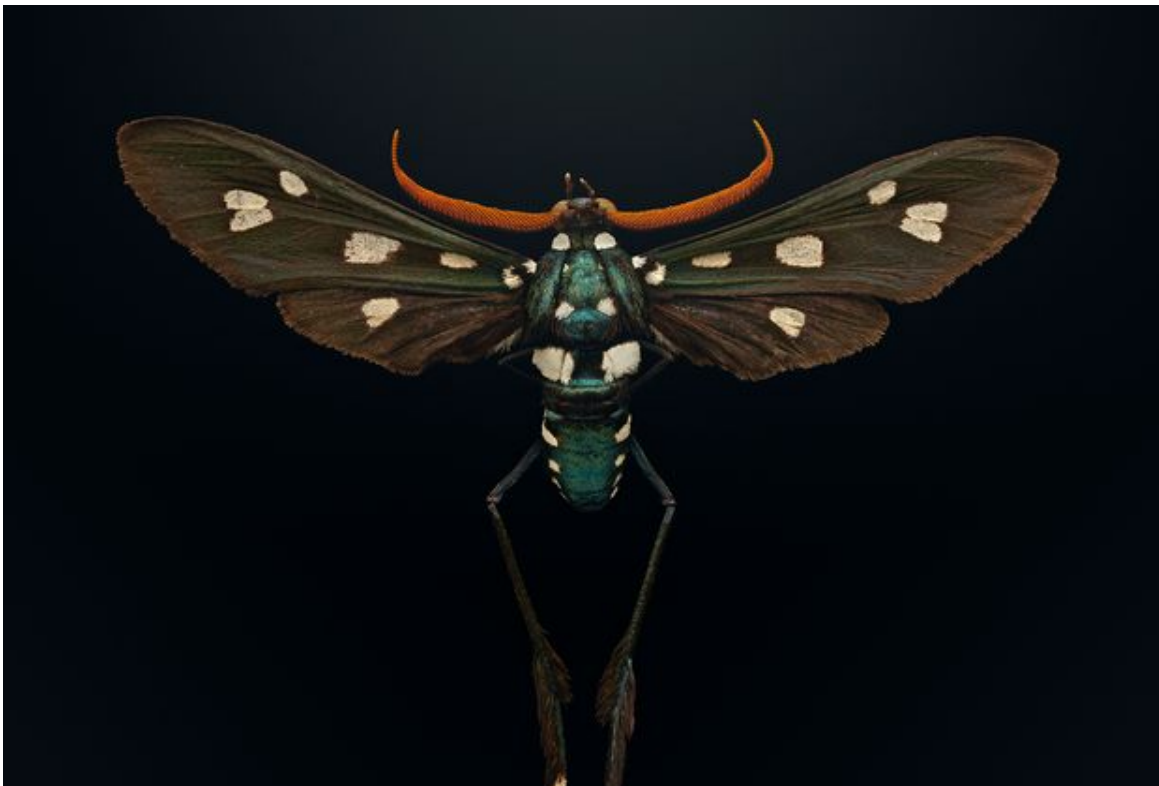
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New York

First of all, they're quite beautiful: The subjects of the large-format prints in "Extinct and Endangered: Insects in Peril" at the American Museum of Natural History are not terrifying like the nuclear-mutated Mothra in the Japanese science-fiction movies, and they are not meant to probe our psyches like Louise Bourgeois's giant sculptures of spiders. The 40 prints lining two extensive corridors are there to be studied and wondered at. The pictures were taken by British photographer Levon Biss, a specialist in macrophotography, and how he did it is itself a wonder.

Mr. Biss (b. 1975) lives in the English countryside, and his involvement with entomology began a decade ago when his young son brought in a beetle he'd caught in the backyard. The boy had gotten a science kit for Christmas, so the two of them looked at the beetle under its microscope; Mr. Biss says it "blew my head off . . . it was stunningly beautiful." He set about photographing the insect; it took him a year to get an image he was satisfied with. In the interim he learned about the role of insects in global ecology and the danger posed by their diminishing numbers and species. He reached out to the AMNH and got the cooperation of David Grimaldi, curator in the Division of Invertebrate Zoology, and others on the staff to pursue the "Extinct and Endangered" project.





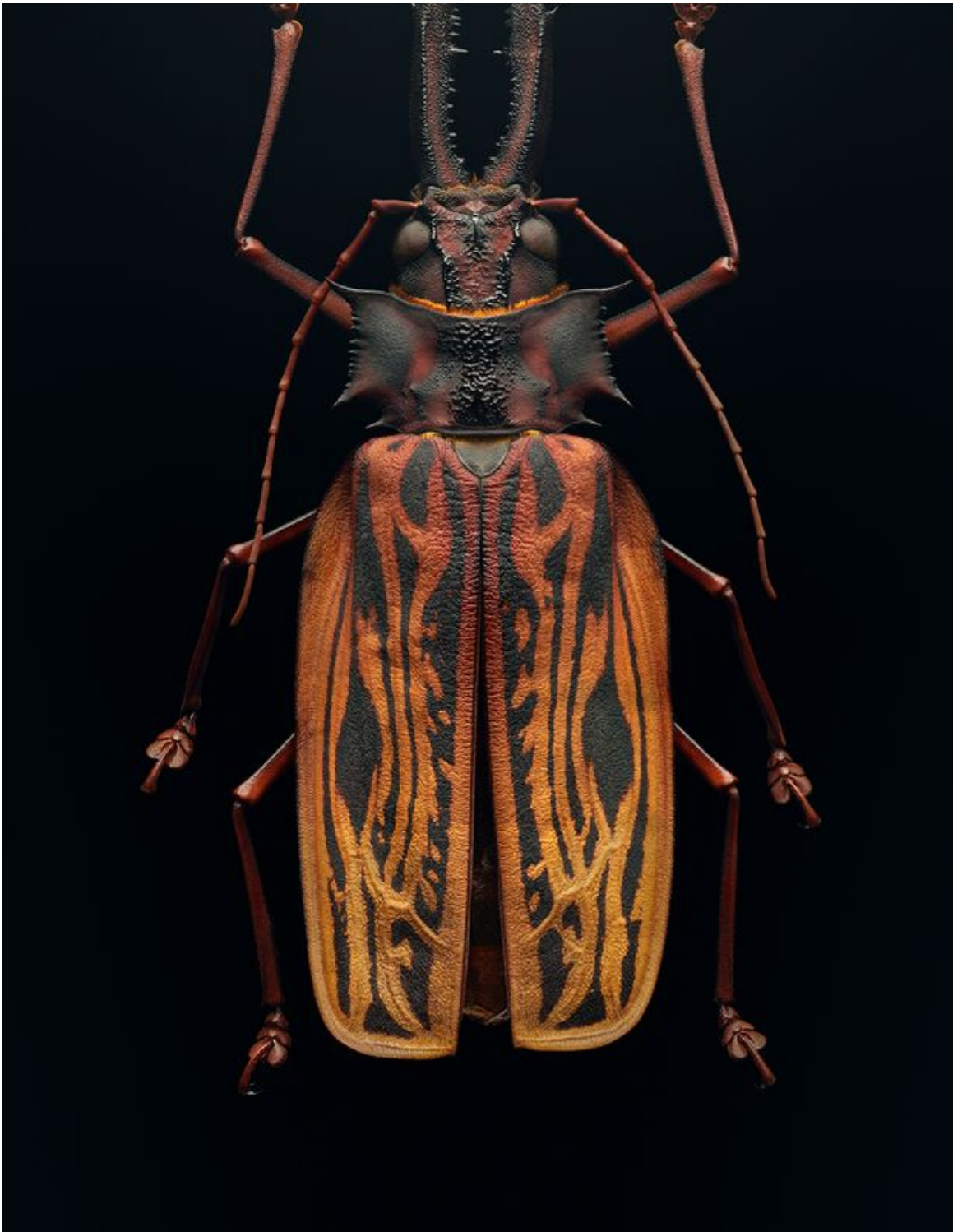
Lesser wasp moth

PHOTO: LEVON BISS/AMNH

The museum has one of the world's largest collections of insects, mounted and cataloged. From this assemblage of tiny corpses, Mr. Grimaldi and other staff entomologists selected, in consultation with Mr. Biss, the 40 to be photographed. Some are so rare that government permission was needed to ship them to England. Some, like the Rocky Mountain locust specimen collected in the 1880s, are so fragile that museum staffers were required to courier them to Mr. Biss's studio. Once there, it took an average of three weeks and as many as 10,000 files for the photographer to make an individual image.

Mr. Biss's camera is a Nikon D850 to which he attached a bellows, a tube lens and a microscope objective (basically a very high-powered magnifying glass). The subject insect may be divided into as many as 20 or 30 sections, each of which is photographed separately. Lighting is one of Mr. Biss's passions; because eyes, legs, wings, etc., reflect light differently, he devises different lighting regimes for each. The macrophotography camera setup has an extremely shallow depth of field, so the lens is electronically advanced toward the subject in seven-micron increments (a micron equals one millionth of a meter) taking 400 or 500 digital pictures that are then merged to create an image in sharp focus from front to back. Paradoxically, smaller insects require more files than larger ones. Finally, the section images are joined to make a file that may be as large as eight, nine or 10 gigabytes, sent here from the U.K. and custom printed in Queens with plastic ink on rigid plastic sheets as big as 128 by 72 inches—huge. The detail is stunning; viewed online at extinctandendangered.com the images can be enlarged enormously for greater and greater detail.





Sabertooth longhorn beetle
PHOTO: LEVON BISS/AMNH

The lesser wasp moth, the shining Amazon ant, and the sabertooth longhorn beetle are each in their separate ways glorious: the first has white spots on its hairy wings and orange feather-like antennae; the second, seen in profile, is an audacious copper color; the third has intricate patterns on its elytra—hardened forewings—that resemble tree bark. The wall text next

to the Hawaiian hammerheaded fruit fly gives us its Latin name, *Idiomya heteroneura*; its wingspan, 0.23 inches; its status, endangered (U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service); its ecological role, herbivore; its AMNH specimen number, AMNH_IZC 00329551; and where it was found, Hawaii (from culture). We also learn “The Hawaiian Islands have the greatest number of modern extinctions anywhere on Earth, in part because organisms on remote islands succumb to species introduced from other places.”



Ninespotted lady beetle

PHOTO: LEVON BISS/AMNH

The picture of the oval, reddish-orange-gold ninespotted lady beetle is 60 inches by 60 inches, as big as a table. We learn from the text that this beetle is a predator and the official state insect of New York. (Who knew New York had an official state insect?) The American burying beetle has stylish red

spots on its black body and was reared in Roger Williams Park Zoo in my native Rhode Island; it can eat larger animals down to the bone. The thick-horned plant bug, the esperanza swallowtail, the elderberry longhorn beetle, the northern bush katydid and the rest are all revealed in intimate particularity.

For the current show, Mr. Grimaldi says, “The thing I want most for people to appreciate about insects is their exquisite, intricate beauty.” Mr. Biss’s photographs ensure they do.

—Mr. Meyers writes on photography for the Journal. See his photographs on Instagram at [@williammeyersphotography](#).

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