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ZOOLOGY

Fear not the charging sauropod

Did dinosaurs run, walk or just lumber along? Fossil remains are sufficient to indicate that with exceptionally tiny brains they must surely have been remarkably slow-witted, but more direct evidence has been needed to determine whether they were equally slow-footed.

That evidence is available from the fossilized tracks of various species, which have been known for some time. British zoologist Robert McN. Alexander of the University of Leeds has now correlated the distance between these tracks with the hip height of the respective species and arrived at what he believes is a reasonable estimate of speed, based on comparison with living animals (NATURE, May 13).

Though he does not rule out the possibility that they could move faster if they had to, Alexander concludes that both the giant sauropods (the largest four-footed animals that ever lived) and their smaller bipedal cousins generally lumbered along. The estimated speeds, based on the tracks, range from 1.0 to 3.6 meters per second (2.2 to 8 miles per hour). By comparison, a brisk human walking speed is about 8 miles per hour and a marathon runner can sustain 12 miles per hour.

Successful biocontrol of fly

For years scientists have known that the common housefly has several natural enemies that should be helpful in controlling its population around breeding grounds such as feedlots and garbage dumps. Most experiments, however, have not been very effective. Now, according to the Department of Agriculture's AGRICULTURAL RESEARCH (April), a parasitic wasp has been used to successfully control flies in the farm environment.

The article focuses on the work of entomologist Philip B. Morgan, of Gainesville, Fla., who releases hundreds of thousands of *Spalangia endius* wasps near fly-breeding grounds. The female wasp lays her eggs in fly pupae, where they grow and eventually kill their host. The small wasps do not generally bother large animals or humans, but the whole local fly population may be decimated within a month. Says Morgan: "This method of fly control is relatively inexpensive and would eliminate the problems that are ordinarily associated with pesticides."

Insect flight on corrugated wings

If man had tried to learn to fly by studying insects, he would still be grounded. York University biologist Christopher J. C. Rees summarizes the current state of this puzzling research in the British government publication SPECTRUM (No. 139). "Analysis of insect flight and flight structures," he concludes, "is revealing much that is completely new to existing aeronautical knowledge."

One surprising aspect of the study Rees has concentrated on is wing structure. The need for extreme lightness and strength has apparently forced insects to evolve a wing that is corrugated rather than smoothly curved like an airplane wing. In conventional aerodynamic terms, this construction restricts the lifting power of the wing (as measured by the "lift-to-drag ratio") to one-fifth that of a subsonic aircraft wing. But because of the beating motion, the increased drag may actually help the insect stay aloft, Rees concludes from his experiments with models.

How some insects are able to hover motionless is even more puzzling, but high-speed film records reveal it may have something to do with a vortex set up when the wings smack together above the insect during the height of their stroke. Rees says that more complicated models than his will be needed to learn more about the detailed movements during flight.