

NATURE NOTES

A Dormouse Living in a Beehive

On the 11th Sept. 1964, while collecting in the region of the Peninj River, West Lake Natron, I had occasion to be up on the plateau above the escarpment bordering the lake watching a Sonja tribesman raiding one of his beehives. The raid was a disappointment - for the owner, that is - because the hive was heavily infested with wax - moth, Galleria mellonella Linnaeus. Amid angry bees the man removed handful after handful of the caterpillar's silk mixed with bits of broken comb and at last brought out, to my surprise, a dormouse, Graphiurus murinus (Desmarest).

The dormouse itself was an amazing sight, being quite incredibly fat. I later measured a layer of subcutaneous fat in the lower abdomen and found it to be 8 mm deep, besides which there was a large volume of fat surrounding the viscera. The stomach contained a brown sludge with fine white specks in it - presumably honey and wax. The measurements of this animal (C.M.C.6962. Preserved in spirit at the National Museum) are:- HB 96 mm; Tl 64 mm; HF 15.5 mm s.u.; Ear 15 mm; Wt. 40.5 gm. Adult ♀. measured when fresh.

On questioning the man, he told me that Galleria and Graphiurus invariably occur together in infected hives and that the Sonja, many of whom live entirely by bee-keeping, blame the dormouse for bringing the moths. Their very robustly built beehives have two entrances; one very small one for the bees, and one large enough for the honey collector to insert his arm and remove the comb. The latter hole is left tightly bunged with brushwood, and it is by making a hole through this bung that the dormouse enters the hive. The animal collects dry grass from beneath the tree and carries it into the hive to make a nest, and the caterpillars, I was told, are brought up from the ground together with the grass.

Galleria mellonella caterpillars live only on honeycomb so the Sonja's explanation of the joint occurrence is unacceptable. One wonders, however, whether there is a true association between the presence of Galleria and of Graphiurus in these hives and, if so, what is the nature of this association. Could it be that the making of a relatively large hole into the hive through the bung leaves a convenient, unguarded, entrance for the moth?

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