Since its beginnings in 1974, the Tyler Prize for Environmental Achievement (http://www.tsc.edu/admin/provost/tylerprize/index.html), the nation’s oldest and arguably most prestigious environmental award, has gone to such scientific legends as Paul Ehrlich, Peter Raven, E.O. Wilson, Tom Eisner and Jerrold Meinwald—most of my scientific heroes, in fact, in whose ranks I never imagined I belonged. So, in February 2011, when I received an e-mail message from Judith McDowell of the Woods Hole Oceanographic Institute with “Tyler Prize” in the subject line, I just assumed that she wanted to ask me to serve on the selection committee. I was absolutely stunned to discover that she actually wanted to tell me that I had won the prize this year. Inasmuch as I hadn’t been expecting to win the prize, she had to fill me in on the details—I didn’t know, for example, that there was a cash award associated with the prize, which was certainly good news. There was, however, some bad news as well; to receive the prize, I’d have to attend a black tie ceremony held in my honor at the Four Seasons Hotel in Beverly Hills, California in April.

Why was this bad news? For a black tie event, I literally did not have a thing to wear. Moreover, I had no idea how to acquire something appropriate to wear. I had never in my life attended a black tie affair—or, for that matter, any kind of even remotely formal affair. I skipped my junior or senior prom in high school (well, not exactly “skipped”—nobody asked me). My own wedding, in my parents’ backyard, was a bit south of business casual. Most of my daily wardrobe comes from a local store called Blain’s Farm and Fleet. I shop there because in addition to choosing from a wide selection of denim jeans, I can also pick up cat food, potting soil, industrial-strength Roundup herbicide for killing garlic mustard in natural areas, and myriad other essentials. Farm and Fleet also carries clothing emblazoned with the logo of Caterpillar Inc. (“Manufacturer of construction and mining equipment, diesel and natural gas engines,” http://www.cat.com/) in nearby Peoria, Illinois. I like to wear clothing with the Caterpillar logo because, as an entomologist, I think it’s funny to wear shirts that say “Caterpillar.”

Herein lies the problem. Over the years, my interest in entomology has been my alternative to having to develop good taste. When I buy expensive jewelry, I buy pins with butterflies or bees; when I order desserts in fancy restaurants, I order the ones made with honey; when I download classical music from iTunes, I pick compositions with arthropod names in the title (e.g., Albert Roussel’s The Spider’s Banquet Symphony No.3). I had a sneaking suspicion that entomological relevance might not be the best guiding principle for picking out suitable clothing for a black tie event at the Four Seasons in Beverly Hills.

It didn’t stop me, though, from trying. I went online looking for formal gowns connected in some way to insects. A Google search for “butterfly evening dress” turned up a gown designed by Alexander McQueen (http://www.net-a-porter.com/product/32080), for only $3,876, marked down from $6,460 (evidently from McQueen’s spring “winged creature theme” collection from 2010—hence the markdown). Given that the total value of every article of clothing I currently own collectively probably doesn’t even add up to the markdown price, this dress didn’t seem like a good investment. Several others (e.g., the Roberto Cavalli Multicolored Butterfly Print dress from the Spring/Summer Collection 2010 and the Butterfly Print Charmeuse Gown with Keyhole Back by Faviana) were more affordable but were either too revealing or way too colorful (given that my current wardrobe color palette ranges primarily from indigo to stone-washed denim). Hours of searching proved fruitless as the date of the affair drew inexorably closer.

So, I sought professional help. My 20-year-old daughter, who by some fluke of genetics ended up with a sense of style that obviously was not maternally inherited, agreed to accompany me on a shopping trip to the Magnificent Mile in Chicago to find a suitable dress. It was a nerve-wracking day, but ultimately we were successful; with her blessing, I settled for a dress in Bloomingdale’s with no connection to insects other than the fact that it was made of silk (designed by Alexander von Furstenberg, but made by Bombyx mori). My daughter loves shopping at Bloomingdale’s for clothes, but for me it was excruciating; moreover, I couldn’t help noticing that nowhere in this iconic emporium were herbicides or pet food available for purchase.
The dress was a major hurdle but shoes presented an even greater challenge. The trip to Chicago failed to turn up any insect-themed formal footwear; and, back at home, I discovered, through an exhaustive Internet search, that apparently only two kinds of people wear fancy shoes with butterflies: toddler girls and strippers. Before winning the Tyler Prize, I had no idea that strippers and pole dancers love butterflies. Check out, for example, the baby-pink “Sexy Tipjar Butterfly Platform Sandals” from the Electric Boutique (www.electricboutique.com), equipped with “a 6 3/4 inch heel, 3 3/4 inch platform, adjustable ankle strap, rubber non-slip sole and 1 1/2 inch slot on butterfly platform for tips. Also has a flap compartment on insole to remove tips from sandal.”

I did find Betula sandals (licensed by Birkenstock) with butterfly-shaped straps but was informed by my daughter that these, too, were unsuitable for a black tie affair. Eventually, I admitted defeat and settled for a pair of shoes that lacked any entomological significance, but I bought a pair I thought my daughter might like and gave them to her immediately after the ceremony in view of the fact that I was unlikely ever to wear them again.

Maybe I was just born too late. There was a time when insects were de rigueur for formal attire. In the mid- to late nineteenth century, women in Victorian England were fascinated with the natural world and, in that inimitable Victorian way, carried that fascination to extremes. Not only were insect-inspired patterns on hats, dresses, and jewelry considered chic, the actual insects themselves, along with other animals, were considered the height of fashion. According to Tolini (2002), “That which was deemed charming from the early 1860s through the 1890s included millinery creations featuring whole, stuffed birds in addition to fanciful creations such as hummingbird earrings and clothing embroidered with iridescent beetle casings.”

Beetle wings apparently came into vogue initially as a consequence of the mid-century importation from India of embroidered fabrics embellished with beetle wings (Rivers, 1988) (http://www.insects.org/blog/page/31), but eventually iridescent or otherwise bright and shiny insects in any order sufficed as adornments for fashionable attire. In 1863, Godey’s Lady’s Book, a Philadelphia-based periodical for women that featured articles and stories of interest to women, trumpeted the “exquisite creations” of one Mme. Tilman, a Paris-based fashion designer, whose clothing line included hats and dresses bedecked with “humming-birds, butterflies and all kinds of brilliant winged insects lighting or seemingly flitting among the beautiful exotics. The birds and butterflies are of course perfect, being the real birds and insects preserved and mounted.” In October 1863, Godey’s reported that “The ornithological and entomological fevers, which broke out last spring will continue with increased violence throughout the winter.”

Charles Darwin’s writings helped to increase interest in all things natural. Lest one doubt the connection, Godey’s Lady’s Book also placed The Origin of Species on its list of recommended books. Also contributing to the continuing popularity of real insects in clothing and jewelry was the Victorian fascination with Egyptology, catalyzed by the writings, both historical and fictional, of German Egyptologist Georg Ebers, which encouraged the collection of Egyptian “antiquities.” Among the antiquities in high demand during this Egyptian revival period were “scarabs,” a generic term for jewelry featuring beetles carved or mounted in the style of pharaonic funerary and religious art (Cherry 1985). In addition to carved stones, actual beetles (generally iridescent specimens from South America) were also incorporated into stickpins, earrings, and other forms of jewelry (http://www.vintagejewelryonline.com/cms/store/product_detail.php?id=00471).

Mercifully, this fad was short-lived; it wasn’t long before many realized that the best way to preserve nature’s beautiful creations may not be to kill them and pin them on hats and dresses. By 1882, a series titled “Art in Dress” ran in Art Amateur, decrying the “wearing of horribly gaudy and glittering insects not only in hats and bonnets but in various parts of dress” and sarcastically predicting a time when “Wasps, hornets, caterpillars and cockroaches will all be allowed to nestle soon near the damask cheek of our fashionable beauties. Then reptiles and fishes will have their day. The stuffed adder will replace the necklace of pearls, and... the fashionable hat of the coming period will have for its chief ornament a lobster looking round the brim, or a mackerel sitting on its tail” (quoted in Tolini, 2002).

What ended up replacing dead beetles by the turn of the century for a brief interval were live beetles (along with live chameleons, turtles, snakes, lizards, marmosets, parrots, canaries, cats, dogs, and even rats and mice) tethered to dresses and hats and free to wander. In a historical review of “portable pets: live and apparently live animals in fashion,” Long (2009) recounts:

In an article from 1886 ['Important Trifles’, The Washington Post, 4 July 1886, p. 4], The Washington Post reported on a golden beetle from Yucatán which, along with various other types of beetles, promised to become a new craze for fashionable women. This article calls the creature the ‘poodle-dog of the tropics,’ worn frequently by stylish ladies of Yucatán, Central America, and the Gulf of Mexico...For the most part, these diminutive live pets were attached to their owners with small collars and chains, usually made of gold. Pinned to the bodice, the leash allowed the animals to roam around the lady’s chest and shoulders, further embellishing her appearance with eye-catching movement. In 1891, one lady strapped a large diamond onto the back of a Brazilian beetle and trained it to fly around her neck at an event, in an ambulatory simulation of a diamond necklace. Natural luminescence was also valued, and a glow-worm could be fastened to a golden chain and attached to the hair; where it would amble about at its leisure while illuminating its wearer. In 1908, Baroness Moncheur, a society lady from a Belgian diplomatic family, arrived at a dinner party ‘with a great firefly perched over her high pompadour and smaller fireflies stuck in and out of her ringlets, until her coiffure resembled a Christmas tree lighted.’

Mercifully, the burgeoning conservation movement (and a realization that fashion demands for beautiful creatures might be contributing to their extirpation in nature) eventually led to a decline in popularity in this practice. Real insects in jewelry, however, haven’t completely disappeared. The invention of polymethylmethacrylate and its modification as a molding powder in 1937 ushered in the acrylic era, and in the form of Lucite, it has led to the deaths of untold thousands of mostly shiny insects (and other arthropods) in pendants, bracelets, necklaces, keychains, and other decorative items (e.g., http://www.lucitejewellery.co.uk/mm5/merchant.mvc?Screen=SFNTtSSStore_Code= lucite&gclid=CNcN6fLq_KgCFw5Kgodoyw0AIAwords continued on page 123