

Why I Joined the Twitterati: Blogs, Tweets & Talks – Making Entomology Visible

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Last November 6th it was two years exactly since I tweeted my first tweet and almost two years since my blog went public. This article is an update of a blog post from 2013 and a written reminder of the talk I gave in St Andrews at ENTO13. It is thus an opportune moment, I feel, in which to assess how things have progressed since then and to see if I can convert other oldies and not-so-oldies to make that leap into the world of public social media.

For many years I had held the whole concept of social media in contempt – Facebook and Twitter, for me, represented the very epitome of mindless gossip and tabloid extremism. I saw them as entirely the domain of the chattering classes and the idle young. Perhaps an extreme view, since some of my children, a number of my colleagues, my wife and even my mother-in-law were on Facebook. Still, as someone who did not get a mobile phone until March 2013 (and only because at the time, during the week, I was living alone, and my wife feels that it is a sensible thing to have in case of emergency), I guess I was just living up

to the image of the techno-refusenik.

That said, I have always felt that the job of a scientist is to communicate and having always had a desire to teach and pass on my enthusiasm for entomology to others, I have not been remiss in coming forward. I did actually have a fling with public engagement way back in 1981 when I worked in Finland and developed their early warning system for cereal aphids. My research actually appeared in the national farmer's magazine (Figure 1) (Leather, 1982a) almost simultaneously with my official scientific publication (Leather & Lehti, 1981).

My subsequent career as, firstly, a forest entomologist with the Forestry Commission and then as a university teacher at Imperial College, was pretty much that of the typical academic, with the occasional appearance on the radio and the rare television interview, plus the odd reference to my work in the national or local newspapers.

Mainly however, I was, until about the turn of the century, just communicating with my peers, i.e. publishing scientific papers and facilitating communication between

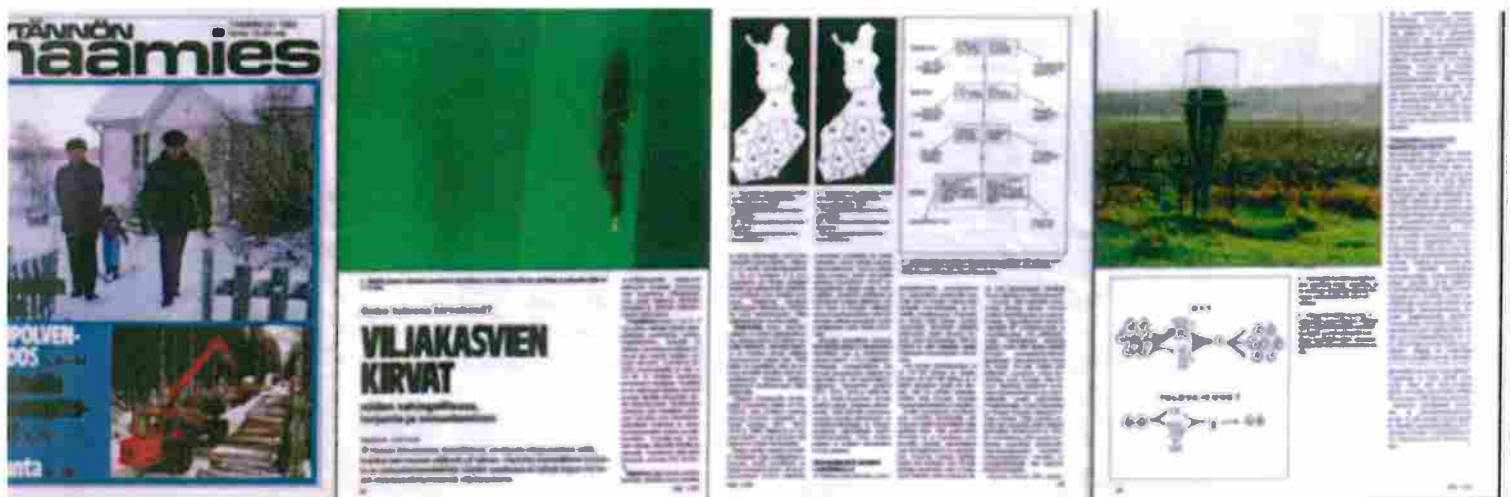


Figure 1. My first attempt at public engagement, Finland 1982.

other entomologists; I seem to have spent the last twenty years or so editing journals, first cutting my teeth on the Royal Entomological Society's house journal *Antenna*, and then moving on to *Ecological Entomology* and for the last eight years as Editor-in-Chief of *Insect Conservation & Diversity*. So there I was facilitating the dissemination of entomological knowledge around the world and busy doing my own entomological research and training future entomologists by running the only entomology degree in the UK and also of course supervising lots of PhD students. All very commendable indeed, but perhaps a bit limited in scope?

Round about the turn of the century I started to get really fed up with the ignorance shown about entomology and the bias towards vertebrates by funding bodies and journals. I started going into schools and giving talks to the general public whenever possible, trying to draw people's attention to the importance of insects by giving talks with titles such as 'Biodiversity: Think Small and Local', in which I extolled the virtue of insects and other invertebrates living around us rather than feeling that ecology was solely confined to the large charismatic mega-fauna living in exotic tropical locations. As time passed and people's attitudes seemed not to be changing, I got even more provocative and my talks to local Sixth Formers was retitled 'Death to polar bears and pandas?'

I also found that I was getting more and more irritated and desperate in print, producing papers and articles with titles such as *British entomology in terminal decline?* (Leather, 2007), *Conservation entomology in crisis* (Leather, 2008), *Institutional vertebratism threatens UK food security* (Leather, 2009), *Do shifting baselines in natural history knowledge threaten the environment?* (Leather & Quicke, 2010).

It was obvious that there was a problem; the misconception that the general public tend to have, in that all insects are either pests or things that sting or bite them and need to be stamped on (Leather & Quicke, 2009), needed to be addressed. Some of the entomological misconceptions were amusing but being entomologically pedantic, still wrong, for example a cartoon in *The Guardian* newspaper of Wednesday 14th August 2013 showing two moths with the wrong number of

limbs, the Top Trumps Bugs edition which has cards with arachnids, annelids and crustaceans; annoying but perhaps excusable. Some misconceptions were just plain inexcusable as in this quote from India Knight's column in *The Sunday Times* of 15th August 2010:

"...disgusting hoverflies, hoovered them up, despite knowing that the adults are harmless and larvae good for gardens. I really hate insects apart from bumblebees especially in the kitchen.."

The problem has been neatly summed up by others too such as Mark Spencer from the Natural History Museum in an interview with *Horticulture Week* on 30th July 2010:

"Even if the government decided to put natural history on the primary curriculum, how would it do so with teachers who don't have the basic skills? They are often terrified of the natural world – they scream at the sight of insects and tell the children 'don't touch'. The whole point is to engage them, but when people are frightened of handling soil, then we have a problem."

One of my PhD students, Fran Sconce, whom I have known since she was an undergraduate, had for some time been extolling the virtues of social media as a means of scientific communication and finally convinced me that it was time to make the leap and to move into a different environment, and thus was born @Entoprof (my Twitter handle for those of you have not yet joined up) and my blog *Don't Forget the Roundabouts*.

The first thing I found when I ventured into the Twittersphere was that there were lots of old friends out there, some of whom I hadn't seen since I was an undergraduate, and even my old school (Ripon Grammar School) started following me. There were also a lot of ex-students, not all of whom are entomologists, despite all my efforts!

On a more serious note, I found increased opportunities for outreach and meeting people I didn't even know existed and I made new professional links here and internationally. Surprisingly, given that I subscribe to a huge number of journal alerts, I have also found Twitter a great way of finding out about research that is going on that I would otherwise have missed. I have also, of course, had great fun continuing my fight against institutional vertebratism (Figure 2).

As a direct result of the above I was asked to contribute to an issue of *Animal Conservation* (Leather, 2013) and with my new friends entered into public debate with *BBC Wildlife Magazine* which resulted in even more coverage for entomology (Figure 3).

I now also use Twitter to interact at conferences, and at INTECOL13 was the tenth most retweeted and mentioned participant, which I think is a good thing for entomology in general.

I have to confess that I have been really inspired and have thoroughly embraced the concept of social media, even to the extent of setting up a Twitter account for the Entomology MSc I run at Harper Adams University,

Fighting against the vertebrate bias



Figure 2. An example of my twitter campaign for more insect coverage in conservation and ecology journals.

BBC Wildlife August 2013



Figure 3. BBC Wildlife grudgingly acknowledges that they may not give insects the coverage they deserve.

MSc I run at Harper Adams University, @EntoMasters, and also a blog for them to use, *Mastering Entomology*, which can be found at <http://aphidsrus.wordpress.com/>

My latest venture with the aid of Janine Heath, @JanineHarperVJ, our PR and Media Relations manager is the A-Z of Entomology, the first letter of which you can view at the following link if you want to learn about aphids <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=liBt59teaGQ>.

I have also found that the mental discipline of writing a blog article every ten to fourteen days or so has helped me get back into the habit of writing papers rather than just editing and commenting on those produced by my students. Even more gratifying is that some of my blog posts are being picked up by other blogs and also in two cases so far, led to published journal articles (Leather, 2014, 2015).

So yes it has been a great two years and a heart-felt thank you to all my

Twitter followers (Tweeps), now standing at 2330, and to all of those people that follow and read my blog. I really have found this foray into the world of social media both useful and educational. It has been a great eye-opener. I can heartily recommend joining Twitter. And of course a really big vote of thanks to Fran for finally convincing me that I should join the Twitterati.

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