Homicide Buffet

15th Seminar in the Forensic Sciences

AP/WIDE WORLD PHOTOS

Forensic entomoligist David Faulkner

LOCAL EVENTS

The worms crawl in. The worms crawl out. But, according to forensic entomologist David Faulkner, the worms would prefer *not* to play pinochle *on* your snout; they'd rather be *in* it.

Worms — or (less poetically and more literally) insects — usually get to work, at least during the first stages of decomposition, in areas that are "hidden away," says Faulkner, who uses his knowledge of entomology to help law enforcement do its work. In recent months, he was an expert defense witness in the trial of David Westerfield, convicted in the murder of seven-year-old Danielle van Dam.

"Generally, insects don't lay eggs on an exposed surface of skin," Faulkner says, "because predators would come after them. But, more importantly, their eggs would dry out quickly. And so they look for either natural or unnatural openings in the victim."

Stab wounds and bullet wounds qualify as "unnatural" openings; "natural" ones are the mouth, ears, eyes...and nasal passages. "Insects will pack some of these more favorable, semiaqueous situations, where birds and animals can't get at them — just pack them solid with eggs," he says. "Flies will go in as far as they can, which may even be down into the throat. Also, if there's fluid-saturated clothing, insects will get down into its crevices, in the collars, around buttons, where there's more protection. These places also maintain higher moisture levels than others."

Faulkner is a member of a very small club. He estimates that only 30 forensic entomologists are at work in North America. One reason why there are so few is that their work can be expensive. Second, he and his colleagues aren't needed to analyze insect activity if the body is found within a couple of days. "It's only when you go a few days longer" that determining the exact time of death — by determining the age of recovered insects — becomes important.

A third reason why there are so few forensic entomologists, says Faulkner, is that "many scientists don't want to testify in court." He laughs. "It's a little rough. It puts everything you've done up to question. And unless you love the challenge of being belittled by one side and made to feel as if you walk on water by the other — well, it's not the same as doing science."

Jurors in the Westerfield trial may wish that the club were smaller still. They heard testimony from three forensic entomologists and were visibly bored before it was over. Insect evidence — maggot mass, the life cycles of blowflies and of the red-legged ham beetles infesting the girl's body — became a key issue nonetheless.

Asked what he thought about the outcome of the trial, Faulkner says, "It took place so quickly; I even had insects, which had been removed from the victim, that were still alive when the trial started; they had not yet completed their development. If I had wanted to reflect on any aspect of the entomological evidence, I didn't have a lot of opportunity to do so."

Faulkner's analysis showed that insect activity did not begin until after Westerfield was already under 24-hour police surveillance, a fact that favored the defense's case. How could he have dumped the body while being so closely watched? But on cross-examination by prosecution, Faulkner appeared to contradict himself, admitting that a number of factors, including the drought and strange weather patterns, may have delayed the life cycles of the insects he used to make his estimate. He also acknowledged the imprecise nature of his chosen science.

In the last few months, Faulkner says, he has learned of other factors besides the weather that could have caused the delay in insect activity — for example, certain "conditions of the body following death that we were not aware of [at the time of the trial]."

Even those who thought they had come to the end of their interest in Westerfield and his unfortunate prey must ask: what "conditions"? "Well, it's thought that maybe he bleached her. And the bleaching wasn't, of course, meant to have an effect on insect life. It was an effort, perhaps, to obscure his own DNA."

Faulkner will have a chance to air this new information, when he and nine others speak at an all-day conference. Faulkner's official topic is "Ant Impact on Death Investigation: Following the Trail." He'll discuss, among other cases, the at-first-presumed suicide of televangelist Manley Hall in Beverly Hills some years ago. The ants revealed problems with Hall's autopsy, then they revealed more. "They were scattered all over the room. 'What are the ants saying here?' I asked myself."

At picnics, as they swat them, some people say, "Bugs love me." Are some dead people more attractive to bugs than others? "Nope," says Faulkner. "I've worked on over 225 cases since 1988, and pretty much anybody who's dead becomes Home Town Buffet."

— Jeanne Schinto

San Diego Museum of Man's "15th Seminar in the Forensic Sciences"
Saturday, April 12, 8:00 a.m. to 5:30 p.m.
San Diego Museum of Art Copley Auditorium Balboa Park
Cost: $40, museum members and students; $60, general
Info: 619-239-2001 or www.museumofman.org