BEES IN THE NEW MILLENIUM

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Sixty-five years after publishing his first paper on bees and 56 years after publishing the first higher-level study of the bees of the world (Michener 1944), Charles D. Michener, professor of entomology at the University of Kansas since 1950, has finally finished his PhD thesis. Well, not exactly—he actually completed that in 1942—but The Bees of the World, the culmination and synthesis of all that he has learned about bees in his distinguished career, is an updated and greatly expanded version of the research he started as a graduate student at the University of California–Berkeley.

This is an extraordinary book that summarizes the current state of knowledge of bee phylogeny, taxonomy, and classification in a single, authoritative, and scholarly treatment. This is no small task, given that bees comprise 425 genera and more than 16,000 species, which are distributed on every continent except Antarctica. The introductory chapters of the book provide background information on bee biology (including sections on development, reproduction, sociality, floral relationships, nests, and modes of parasitism), anatomy (of adults and larvae), the bee fossil record, bee biogeography, the history of bee classification, and our current understanding of higher-level bee phylogeny. While the introductory chapters provide the background, the major portion of the book focuses on bee taxonomy, classification, and identification to the level of genus and subgenus.

The book is organized taxonomically with each section covering a higher taxon (tribe, subfamily, or family). Table 16-1 provides a summary classification to the level of subgenus, in combination with an estimate of the total number of species within each subgenus and genus. This
are based on well-supported phylogenies.

Though the book focuses less on bee phylogeny than on bee identification and taxonomy, it provides the basis for future phylogenetic studies at a variety of levels. Michener does an excellent job of pointing out what is known (e.g., the monophyly of the long-tongued bees, the monophyly of the Apidae, the monophyly of the corbiculate bees) as well as what is not known (the exact branching pattern of the families, subfamilies, and tribes). In fact, the discussion of what we do not know (or what is not well supported by morphological or molecular data) may prove to be an important aspect of the book to students of bee phylogeny. Consider, for example, what we do not know. First, we do not necessarily have a clear understanding of the phylogenetic relationships among the seven families of bees. Consider his comments on the Stenotritidae (an enigmatic family of Australian bees): In Alexander and Michener’s (1995) phylogenetic study, Stenotritidae “fell in such diverse positions in different analyses that there was no basis for considering it closest to any other bee group. My belief, notwithstanding, is that the Stenotritidae are either the basal branch, sister group to all other bees, or a group within or sister to the Colletidae” (p. 123). Indeed, recent molecular results strongly support one of these hypotheses, but I cannot tell you which one (Danforth and Sipes, unpublished). The text is filled with other candid observations on what we do not know: “It seems best to recognize that we know nothing about [the] cladistic relationships” among the four genera of the subfamily Meganomiinae (p. 409). In the discussion of higher-level phylogeny of the Megachilidae, Michener points out that it is unclear whether the Fidelinae or Osmiini are monophyletic groups (p. 417–418), providing two perfectly good PhD thesis topics to some interested graduate students. Within the large family Apidae (formerly considered the families Anthophoridae and Apidae), there is much we do not know about higher-level phylogenetic relationships (in spite of the excellent study of Roig-Alsina and Michener 1993). Questions include what is the placement of the Xylocopinae (the carpenter and allodapine bees); where do the parasitic tribes Isepeolini, Osirini, and Protepeolini belong (within the Nomadinae or not); and is the subfamily Apinae monophyletic (p. 570)? This list goes on. New discoveries will undoubtedly come about in the next few years, both because of active work in the area of the bee fossil record (e.g., Engel 2001) as well as in the field of bee molecular systematics (e.g., Cameron and Mardulyn 2001, Danforth 2002). With new data sets provided by the slowly evolving single copy nuclear genes, we are at a stage where we can expect in the next 5 to 10 years to have a well-resolved (and well-supported) phylogeny of the bees, at least at the level of the tribes, subfamilies, and families. And molecular data can also provide us a glimpse of species-level phylogenetic relationships within some of the taxonomically most difficult groups (e.g., Sipes and Wolf 2001). Michener has laid the foundation for these studies and has already stimulated much active research in bee phylogeny through the publication of Bees of the World.

In conclusion, by condensing into one book all the keys and taxonomic information, Michener has made it possible for anyone, anywhere in the world, to key out bees to genus and subgenus and then to track down the primary literature on that group for species-level identification (if such a taxonomic study exists). This book is obviously of great use to bee biologists, but it will also be an invaluable resource to botanists interested in bee–plant interactions, pollination biologists, and conservation biologists. The book, as noted by Jerome G. Rozen Jr. on the back cover, will become the “bible” for bee biologists of any sort. Indeed, as a result of this book and one previously published on the North and Central American bees (Michener et al. 1994), the “Bee Course” (http://research.amnh.org/invertzoo/beecourse) was developed by Jerome G. Rozen Jr. and Ronald J. McGinley. This course is a 10-day, intensive class in bee identification and biology (offered annually at the American Museum of Natural History’s Southwestern Research Station, Portal,
Arizona). The highlight of the course is, of course, going into the field with Charles Michener and collecting bees. On the class field trips, Dr. Michener invariably collects some interesting species of bee that no one else has managed to pick up. It is then clear to us all why Dr. Michener has had such an outstanding career in bee biology: He just loves to collect (and study) bees.

References cited

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