

IN THE FIELD WITH DR. CLARKE

The following is an account of three days in 1987 on a mountain top on the Queen Charlotte Islands, British Columbia, Canada with Dr. J. F. Gates Clarke. It was written by his assistant Nancy McIntyre. She took this photograph of Dr. Clarke. When he saw it later, he said this was how he wished to be remembered by his colleagues.



J. F. Gates Clarke in the field: Queen Charlotte Islands, 1987. (Photograph by Nancy McIntyre.)

After a brief time of beautiful sunshine, in an area that reminded us of the opening scene of "Sound of Music," the weather was changing. Our helicopter had left us on the mountain less than three hours before. A blanket of white fog began to fill in the valley below. Lovely to watch as it inched its way up the elevations, but as it engulfed our location we realized our collecting might be greatly curtailed.

It was Dr. Clarke's third collecting trip to these islands, and much effort and expense had been put into this expedition to an elevation of 2575 feet on Graham Island. When glaciers covered a large portion of North America, these peaks were still exposed and he felt there could be some very interesting finds. He had found new species on previous trips to similar elevations where he had collected during the day by "beating the bushes". This time he intended to collect using a black light and sheet.

As the fog enclosed our mountain saddleback we set up our equipment for the evening. A huge outcropping of rock made a perfect backing for our sheet. Our borrowed car battery and 12 volt black light were soon ready. It was not yet dark, so we had our handful of trail mix for supper and put on our warm gear for the damp, chilly night ahead. We had set up our primitive camp about 25 yards from the sheet near two depressions left by last year's snows. These gullies would provide good protection from the winds that often blow on these western slopes.

Dr. Clarke said he did not think we would have very good collecting because of the

cold. Another reason, he said, was because we were well above the tree line and only sparse grasses and thick heather covered the nearly bare rock base. There did not seem to be much that would support a moth population.

About 2245 h it was dark enough to turn on the light. We made our way over the uneven terrain in the thick fog. No sooner did we attach the light cords to the battery than we were bombarded by dozens of a single species of moth. Dr. Clarke was in his glory! After collecting until we became frustrated by not being able to talk because the moths kept getting in our mouths and behind our glasses, we disconnected the battery to eliminate the attracting light.

Before dark we had carefully marked our camp area. Now that we had all the specimens we wanted, we started back to camp. The fog was thicker than ever and we became disoriented. We were wandering around an area no larger than a football field. We must have been within ten yards of all our gear, but our flashlights simply could not penetrate the fog. We each tried every "rule of the woods" we knew from experience and Scouting, but nothing worked. There were no mossy trees—no trees at all. There was no wind off the Pacific, which was several miles away. There were no clues except for the fact that our area was relatively flat and as we wandered, if we began to go downhill we knew to turn back to flatter land. We dared not separate. This fog reminded Dr. Clarke of a time when he lived in London and the fog was so thick he had to feel his way along the edge of the pathway to reach his home. He remained cheerful, encouraged me with stories, and would not let me be afraid. I am sure he was exhausted. The temperature had dropped into the upper 40's and we both knew the rest of the night would be very long and cold without our sleeping bags. Finally, out of the mist we spotted his red backpack just ten feet away. Warily, we crawled into our damp sleeping bags to try to get a few hours sleep. I was still trying to get settled and warm when I heard Dr. Clarke begin to snore. Dr. Clarke had had a successful night of collecting.

The next two days were foggy and wet. Lepidoptera collecting was very poor. We spent most of our time turning over slate slabs of rock to see what treasures they hid. Anything alive, we captured. He was particularly interested in a small centipede we found. It appeared to be an immature, but we later found out it was a "pigmy" species. Melted snow pools yielded great finds. We were never at a loss for something to collect.

After our handful of trail mix for lunch on our third day, the fog began to lift. We could see a bright line along the horizon. For two and a half days we had worried about the helicopter getting back in to pick us up. Now, at last, conditions were beginning to improve. Excited about the weather change, I dashed up a slight incline, missed my footing, turned an ankle and heard a snap. Dr. Clarke tried to help me up, but we were both pretty sure my right ankle was broken. Just what he needed—an assistant with a broken bone! He wrapped it tightly in an ace bandage and my mountaintop collecting was over. The weather closed in again and things looked very doubtful for the helicopter to pick us up at the appointed time five hours later. There was no way we could be found in this fog. Our only tracking equipment was a borrowed walkie-talkie with a range of one mile. I could tell Dr. Clarke was very concerned. My ankle was really swelling and had turned a strange shade of green. Because of the cold and wet there was not much pain, but another night under these conditions would be difficult for both of us. As the hours crawled on and the weather did not improve, we worried even more. I had taken very few pictures because of the rain, but now we felt we needed a record of the conditions—just in case. That is when I took the picture of Dr. Clarke.

About 1730 h we heard a chopper. It was well below our location, but coming our way. The sound grew louder and Dr. Clarke quickly began collecting our gear. Then the engine noise faded as did our hopes for a prompt pickup. For the first time, I cried. Shortly, we heard the rotors again and this time the sound was louder and moving our way. Our greatest fear was that our pilot would not make an earnest effort to reach us in the fog since he did not know our desperate situation. He might decide to try again tomorrow. So with Dr. Clarke using the compass and me a short range radio, we anxiously explained our situation and actually led the pilot to a point where he could see the target. Dr. Clarke had set up using our collecting sheet and backpacks. The helicopter was nearly on top of us before we could see it.

The helicopter landed and quickly all our gear was put on board. We were airborne in less than eight minutes. I counted only 37 seconds before we dropped out of our cloud to a bright sunny day. On the way to the hospital, our hard earned specimens received gentle care and so did I. Dr. Clarke had had another successful trip in the field.

Little did I know this would be the man I would marry.

NANCY L. DUPRE CLARKE, *Department of Entomology, NHB 127, National Museum of Natural History, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C. 20560.*