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Scattered Reflections on the Dung Beetle

by George Staehle

Human scientists have discovered that the dung beetle can push its scavenged ball of antelope droppings to a secluded picnic area faster than a speeding dung sweepster. It's done by navigating with polarized light from the moon. That's light scattered off molecules of air, allowing the dung beetle's built-in, polarized Ray-Bans to differentiate between light that has to plow through tons of atmosphere and that emanating from airplanes and SUV high beams in the African savanna.

We always knew that this clumsy Mr. Magoo of the insect world navigated in the daytime from polarized *sunlight*. But from the million-times-fainter, reflected sunlight from the moon is welcome news.

Having advanced degrees in optical physics, the dung beetle knows this stuff like the back of its thorax and can detect the polarized light pattern from the moon, which it uses to wobble along the shortest, and therefore safest, path between two points. The beetles probably developed the polarized light trick at night when they were desperate for a unique navigating source and then used it during the day because it was higher-tech than using direct sunlight. Besides the techno-swagger, it also gave them a thick hide against snide ant calls like, "Hey, bowlegged sissy fuss," when they had to scurry backwards, pushing balls of slippery brown matter up a hill over and over.

Immediately after learning about the beetle's secret for going on the straight and narrow by means of polarized moonlight, and not to be out

dung, I rushed outside to see if the moon would help me walk in a straight line, especially if I had downed several beers—no more embarrassing confrontations with the law if I could remember to drive drunk only in moonlight.

But my writing support group said I needed nobler applications. So I wrote all my stories wearing polarized sunglasses in moonlight. This helped get my ideas straight without rewrites, but had the annoying side effect that I always told the truth. This ruined my writing for a while until someone reminded me that there is more real truth in fiction than in fact.

The news of my success spread around the neighborhood like gleaming white tails in a skunk race, and soon, people wanted all important events to be held in bright moonlight—state-of-the-union speeches, newscasts, and other people's court trials and wedding vows. But we live in a busy world. There are too many important things to do when Earth's single moon is hung over in Malaysia or wakes up in a fog.

Soon, a small group of people in our town, to whom truth really mattered, set sail for Saturn and Jupiter, which have at least 23 and 16 moons, respectively—a welcome plethora of moonshine and a haven for passing straight-line sobriety tests. And since all of us now loved every living being as we did ourselves, we packed our suitcases with jars of dung beetles, with lots of dung and plenty of holes in the lids.

