Cover feature

Christmas BEETLING ABOUT

With Dr Chris Reid
and an introduction by the editor

Dr Chris Reid. Photos: Anthony Warry

For the past decade, Helensburgh's Dr Chris Reid has been Beetling About. As a regular columnist, he's entertained readers with tales of his adventures in entomology, from capturing careless young coconut weevils to driving around the forests of north-east NSW with 4kg of frozen fresh roo poo in a fridge.

Along the way, as vicarious travellers, we've discovered what makes the Illawarra a biodiversity hotspot, the difference between beetles and bugs, how moths pretend to be leaves, and why working with biosecurity agencies is fun. Over the years, Chris has written about 100 articles for his local paper.

Driven by what the *Flame* strongly suspects is a dedication to conservation as fierce as those bombardier beetles he featured in September's edition, Dr Chris writes with a wonderfully wry and gentle humour. He is one of our most popular columnists and has generated more questions than any other (editor's tip: start with this excellent collection of common enquiries at australian.museum/learn/species-identification/ask-an-expert).

Locally, Chris is known for rescuing moths at Helensburgh Station, finding rare beetles feeding on wonga vines and introducing colleagues to Otford's funnel-webs. He's suggested practical ways to engage students with biology, drawn attention to our luck in having living fossils (giant dragonflies) in upland swamps, and opened a can of glow-worms by revealing that the occupants of Helensburgh's most famous train tunnel aren't worms at all – they are, of course, fly maggots.

Nationally, Chris is renowned as the principal research scientist and curator of entomology at the Australian Museum, an advisor to government, CSIRO, universities and biosecurity teams, and the nation's sole expert on leaf beetles. He's also compiled a guide to Christmas Beetles that's now a free app, which we recommend everyone download (it's best used with a magnifying glass, so that's one kid's Chrissy gift sorted too).

In September, when Chris was awarded the 2025 Australian Museum Research Institute (AMRI) Medal, his employer hailed his decades of "scientific excellence", issuing a statement saying: "His research has transformed global understanding of beetle taxonomy, encompassing more than 3,200 species across Australia, the West Pacific, Indonesia and Europe. He has authored numerous papers and open-access resources, contributed to multidisciplinary research projects, and served on the NSW Threatened Species Scientific Committee. Dr Reid's work has also captured public imagination through citizen science initiatives, including the popular Christmas beetle app."

So, for this special Christmas edition of *Beetling About*, we asked Dr Chris to tell us more about his own remarkable career as an entomologist.

"Always find that difficult," he said, in typically understated fashion, "but here goes…"

How it started

In the beginning there was a Mother, who wanted to be a biologist but wasn't allowed by her conservative parents and a Father who left school at 15 without any useful qualifications but discovered nature as a water bailiff in the Scottish highlands. So from early days we were out in the countryside and rearing caterpillars in jam jars, and I must have caught the bug, as it were.

I started off with moths, because the only entomological books we had were *South's British Moths* (my great-grandfather's 1908 edition, which I scribbled on with a biro, sadly). But moths are tricky to set and my mother was always a little sad killing them when the hairy ones had such sweet faces. I discovered that we had a lot of different hoverflies in the garden and it was a challenge to catch them (I didn't have a net) and there was a guide for their identification, so I got into those.

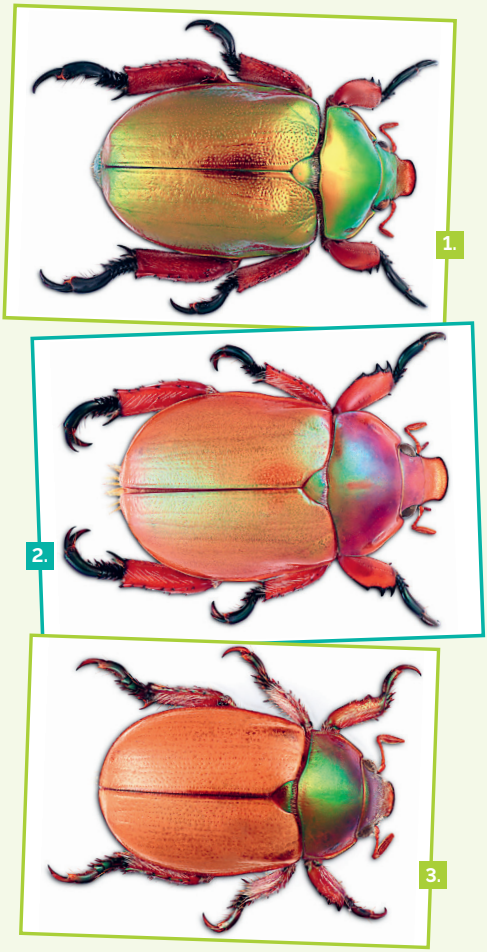
Then disaster – when I went to secondary school I discovered there was a boy three years older than me already collecting hoverflies. I couldn't possibly be seen copying him, so I switched to beetles.

But the fly connection was still important – it just so happened that an entomologist whose speciality was flies had been appointed at the local museum in Belfast – my older friend was drawn in and he brought me along. So began many years of volunteering at the museum.

I started publishing short articles on beetle discoveries in Ireland and, to do that, needed to contact experts, expanding my range of contacts and collaborators.

After a few false starts post-school (e.g.

MERRY CHRISTMAS BEETLE HUNTING



Download the Australian Museum's free app, the Christmas Beetle Identification Guide, on Android or Apple.

Dr Chris's tip: "The best way to look for them is to visit strong lights at night, at the edge of forest." Waiting on a train platform at night? You may even see some in the station lights. Share your finds via the 'Christmas Beetle count' run by Invertebrates Australia through iNaturalist and look out for these locals:

1. *Anoplognathus viridiaeneus* (King Beetle);
2. *Anoplognathus montanus* (Duck Billed Beetle);
3. *Anoplognathus flavipennis* (Furry Tailed Prince).

Photos: Mike Burleigh, Australian Museum

becoming an ornithologist), I realised I needed a degree to progress. I discovered that the 'easiest' entomology degree in the UK was agricultural, so I did Agricultural Zoology at the University of Newcastle upon Tyne, where, 'coincidentally', two of the staff were beetle collectors.

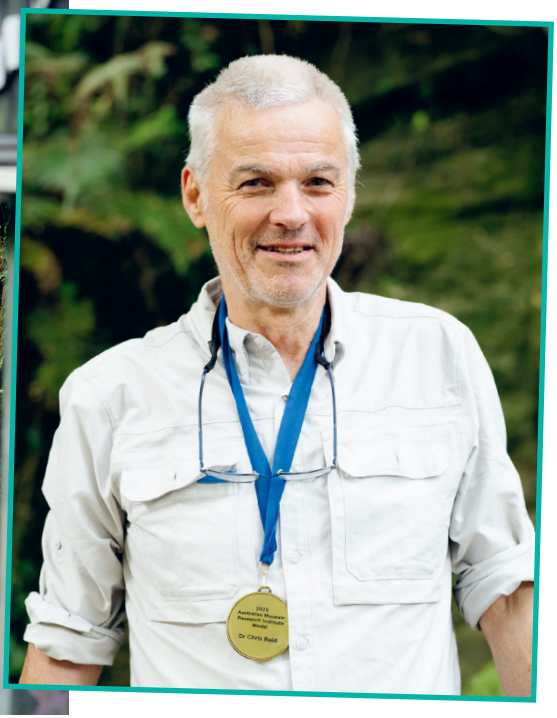
When I finished Honours I was determined not to do a PhD and instead was recruited by an overseas aid organisation as a pest advisor in the Neotropics. However, the host country rejected my application because I didn't have a PhD! I changed my mind.

Where to do a PhD? Definitely not London or the US. My Honours degree supervisor had spent two years working with CSIRO at Canberra in the 70s, studying pests of eucalypt plantations – he said, 'Go to Australia, it's a biologist's paradise, you'll love it.' So I did, and I did.

Adventures around the world

I wish I'd read *The Voyage of the Beagle* early on, because Darwin was a real adventurer, my trips have been feeble by comparison. However, adventures were inculcated early as my father's ambition on holidays was to find a beach with nobody else on it. So we spent hours carrying rucksacks, windbreaks etc just to get to some remote cove on the west coast of Scotland or Ireland.

As part of my work, I've been to Indonesia,



Malaysia, Timor Leste, Papua New Guinea, Solomons, Fiji, many museums in Europe, and throughout Australia. It's a modest list compared to my colleagues.

Perhaps the biggest adventure was three weeks climbing in the Muller Range, Borneo, with a broken foot, an Indonesian ornithologist and three local Hovongan guides. The ornithologist nearly died, I met a bear, and a few other things…

Entomology as a career

Almost everything you need to know is at the Australian Entomological Society website, www.austentsoc.org.au/education/careers. And anybody looking for a career in entomology should join this society [disclaimer: I'm no longer a member].

Pest expertise is always going to be important, increasingly so with climate change and the extraordinary ease with which we now move things around the globe. But insects are increasingly used for control of pests and weeds and this too will only increase.

Something that the AES website does not mention is volunteering. I volunteered for years and many of the students I've taught who have stayed in the subject have also been volunteers. If I have a competent volunteer I usually try to employ them as first pick for any casual positions that come up (e.g. through grants). So they build up work experience.

The popularity of Christmas beetles

It is only 6 November as I write this, yet already I have had a social media request (from Brisbane) for a story on Christmas beetles. It's amazing how popular they are. I wrote a web-based guide for their identification almost 25 years ago, which was superseded by our app in 2017 (designed and illustrated brilliantly by Mike Burleigh). An updated version of the app is the basis for an annual 'Christmas Beetle count' run by Invertebrates Australia through iNaturalist. Please give it a go this Christmas!

Here are some of the local species.

Anoplognathus viridiaeneus is the 'King Beetle' – it used to be a common species here but is rarely seen now in Sydney, most recent sightings are around Engadine.

Anoplognathus montanus is a common Sydney species and the male has a classic duck-billed head.

Anoplognathus flavipennis is at its southern limit in the Sydney area. There is just one record for the Illawarra and it's very recent (2024). This is a species that we might expect to see more of if climate change predictions are correct. It's an unusual Christmas beetle as it feeds on pinnate acacias, not eucalypts.