

The Bug Room

What is the Bug Room? A small, rather smelly, dark room in the Royal Ontario Museum. It has a gasketed steel door, concrete floor, walls and ceiling, and is lined with steel shelves. It is the place where thousands of hungry carpet-beetle larvae eat the remnants of meat from the bones of animals to produce skeletons.

The museum requires the skeletons of many kinds of animals for scientific study. The shapes and sizes of the parts of the skulls, limbs or teeth are very important in distinguishing one kind of animal from another. Often the description of a new kind of animal may be largely based on a description of the skeleton. Other researchers compare skeletons with the bones of fossils to determine the relationship of modern and ancient creatures. There are many needs for a large and varied collection of skeletons.

There are several ways to make a skeleton from a whole animal. The first step is to cut away most of the meat. Good skeletons can be made by boiling the bones until the remaining meat can be picked off. This requires a lot of tedious hand work. Most technicians prefer to use the Bug Room, because it is easier (the bugs do most of the work), and because it yields a cleaner result, especially for delicate small animals.

Once the skeleton is fleshed out and dried, it is put in a metal tray, covered with cotton because the bugs like to work under cover, and placed on a shelf in the bug room. The bugs soon find the skeleton and begin to nibble at the dried

meat. Actually the beetles do not feed as adults. It is the larvae which do the work. So long as they are warm and humid the larvae feed vigorously on the soft parts. After a few weeks, the bugs have done their job and the dried carcass has become a skeleton.

When the tray with skeleton is removed from the bug room it must be fumigated to kill any remaining insects, since their appetites are a dreaded hazard to museum displays and research collections. Departments with collections of insects or bird and mammal skins must store their materials in metal cabinets loaded with insecticide, just in case they are invaded by stray bugs.

Even after the skeleton has been stripped by the bugs, it usually has to be bleached and degreased to produce the characteristic clean bone-white appearance. The specimen may be left as a collection of separate bones, or fastened together into a life-like pose. Usually the latter is only done for display, since the researcher prefers to work with the separated bones.

While bugs are pests in the wrong place, they can be of great value in the right place. As long as bugs love the Bug Room, they will continue to work industriously for museum scientists, saving them many valuable hours.

