

Snelling's flies for God

Paul Willis investigates a creation scientist's claims about a geological formation and exposes more than one fly in the ointment.



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Although I'm always loath to admit it, serendipity has come up trumps for me too many times to be just a fluke. There's nothing supernatural in it, of course, but it does make me wonder when seemingly unrelated events suddenly entwine into a common theme. Such a serendipitous episode causes me to write this article.

I've been arguing on an online creationist forum for some time now¹. It mostly focuses on intelligent design but my strengths are in palaeontology and geology. In October 2000 I was challenged by another list participant to explain the Belmont Insect Beds. The thrust of his argument was a hyperlink to an article on the Institute for Creation Research website entitled *An Australian Fossil Insect Bed Resulting from Cataclysmic Destruction*², by Andrew Snelling

I wrote a lengthy reply to this argument that forms the substance of this article. The serendipity arises from a request from another online anti-creationist list for information on the Belmont Insect Beds. So I forwarded a copy of my reply, which then came under the gaze of the Venerable Bearded Wizard of the Australian Skeptics who asked me to work it up for *the Skeptic*. OK, so not really much of a serendipitous occasion but, if it were not for the two requests coming from two different directions at the same time, this mini essay would have stayed on the discussion list until it fell off the bottom in due course, lost to the ether.

So what's the argument?

The Belmont Insect Beds are a famous deposit of Permian (around 250 million year old) fossil insects in the Hunter Valley near Newcastle. In his article, Snelling attempts to show that these insect beds are proof positive that a global flood happened. When I read it, I could see lies, half-truths and misrepresentations that badly needed rebutting. So here is my rebuttal.

Firstly, to Snelling himself. I have met him only once, at a creationist meeting at Katoomba. This was just after Alec Ritchie's article "Will the real Dr Snelling please stand up?" (*the Skeptic* 11:4) was published, where Ritchie clearly showed that Snelling leads a dual existence; one as a respectable, mild-mannered geologist with orthodox scientific publications and the other as a fire-breathing creationist vehemently opposed to old-earth geology and evolution. When questioned, Snelling could not give me a satisfactory answer as to why he does not mention creationist arguments in his scientific, peer-reviewed articles. He also could not provide a satisfactory explanation why, in his talk, he didn't acknowledge that absurd dates he gave for a uranium deposit were in fact dates from work he had done himself. He also couldn't explain why on one hand he found that radiometric dating was "hopelessly flawed and unscientific" while on the other he

was relying on radiometric dating for a lucrative income as a geological consultant. From my brief encounter with him I was impressed only by his plasticity of mind and the sincerity with which he manipulated the data to his own ends.

And so to his article. I've selected extracts shown in quotation marks for comment. To his credit, Snelling provides a thorough review of the literature concerning the Belmont Insect Beds.* Where he comes unstuck is in his selective interpretation of that literature. So let's start with some of his geological observations.

Selective interpretation

The fine grain size of the tuffaceous chert bed has facilitated the detailed preservation of even the venation in the prolific insect wings entombed therein. Stratification is pronounced and well-defined joints cause the tuffaceous chert to break into rhomb-shaped blocks.

Snelling glosses over some important geology here. Fine-grained stratified deposits that preserve the most fragile details of an insect's morphology can only develop under the quietest of depositional environments. This is not consistent with a flood. If Snelling is implying that these were somehow created by a global flood (an implication consistent with his previous writings), he does not provide a mechanism by how this could be achieved.

Elsewhere in the article Snelling states, correctly, that this deposit is some two and a half feet thick. He omits to mention that a fine-grained stratified deposit takes a long time to accumulate and the thicker it is, the longer that time. This is classic sedimentological deposition. We can recreate these exact structures in the lab, we know how they form and the secret is time, lots of it.

Further, this is where Snelling lies through being out of context. Snelling carefully forgets to tell the

*I'll be interested to see if, in the future, this sentence is quoted out of context by creationists in an attempt to demonstrate that I actually support Snelling's work.

reader that there is around 3km of sediment *on top* of the Belmont Insect Beds. These three kilometres of sediment are flat lying and could only have been produced by a large river estuary. There are numerous lines of evidence that indicate this is how the sediments were put in place, slowly over millions of years. And there is *no* evidence within that 3km of sediment that would be consistent with them being laid down by a global flood.

He also forgets to mention that, on top of that 3km of sediment are lava flows; something else that indicates a greater antiquity than he is willing to entertain.

And it gets worse. He neglects to mention that there is *over a kilometre* of sediments below the insect beds. Again, from all studies and reconstructions, rivers laid down this sediment and there is no evidence of a global flood down there either.

Still he has not told the whole truth. Below that sediment is another set of sediments *over 20km thick!* This is mostly marine material, accumulated slowly (we know this because we cannot get similar types of rock to form quickly), which has been folded and eroded before more sediment was plonked on top. There's not the slightest bit of evidence in this whole 24km of sediment that any of it was laid down in a global flood; quite the opposite. All the evidence points to this material being laid down slowly over millions of years in a series of episodes with unknown periods of time in between.

Lying by omission

What I'm accusing Snelling of here is lying by omission. By not putting the insect beds in their correct context Snelling is avoiding a lot of evidence that his whole hypothesis is wrong and creating a false impression of the sudden creation of the deposit - a neat but deceitful trick.

Of significance is the fact that these insect remains in this tuffaceous chert horizon are associated with plentiful fossil conchostracans (mostly diminutive, branchiopod crustaceans with a

bivalved carapace enclosing the whole body, and related to water fleas). Living conchostracans inhabit freshwater environments.

Again, Snelling lies by omission. He correctly states that there is something significant here then neglects to say what it is. Conchostracans require quiet, clear, freshwater to live. This is exactly the kind of environment that palaeontology would predict would be a likely place for insects to be fossilised. This is not the kind of environment that you would expect to occur in the turmoil of a global flood.

Sleight of mind

Many theories have been advanced to explain how insects might have evolved, beginning with a few wingless groups in Devonian rocks. After a gap in the Lower Carboniferous (Mississippian), there is a sudden explosive "appearance" of winged insects in Upper Carboniferous (Pennsylvanian) and Permian rocks, where representatives of nearly all extant orders are found. There is definitely no evidence of macroevolutionary transitional forms amongst the myriad of fossilized insects found in the Belmont Insect Bed, nor in the insect fossil record as a whole. Insects appear suddenly in the record, fully-formed, and fully-functional (intelligently designed and created), and after that they just diversify (reproduce after their "kinds").

Snelling's next sleight of hand is to misrepresent the facts concerning the history of insects. He makes it sound like the Belmont insects are the first record of insects or close to it. In fact, if you take his own writings and make them explicit, the Belmont insects occurred some 120 million years after the first appearance of insects in the fossil record (he notes that the first insects are Devonian in age and, as noted earlier, that the Belmont Insect Beds are Permian in age, a difference of 120 million years). A lot can happen and evolve in 120 million years! Add to this the well-known fact that Snelling himself starts the essay with; that insects

rarely fossilise because they are mostly so fragile. Then the Belmont Insect Beds cease to be any evidence for creation and perfectly in accord with science.

In reality the strata contain a record of death, so graphically evident in this Belmont Insect Bed. Hundreds of millions of insects were suddenly caught in a blanket of volcanic ash catastrophically blasted over them. Wings were ripped from insect bodies, though sometimes bodies without wings and legs, or with parts of only some legs, survived the volcanic blast to be entombed with all the wings.

I can scarcely contain my incredulity at this statement. Just think about it for a nanosecond and the stupidity of the claim is self-evident. He's suggesting here that all the insects in the Belmont Insect Beds were suddenly caught in volcanic ash, which was powerful enough to rip their wings off. What would you think would happen to a delicate insect wing if placed in a volcanic ash flow of such power? Mechanically it would be ground out of existence. Thermally, it would be cooked out of existence (these kinds of flows are pretty hot!). The fact that these wings have survived indicates that they have been handled very gently. This is completely at odds with what Snelling is saying here.

The accumulation of this silicified volcanic ash bed was no slow and gradual process in some temporal habitat, for only a catastrophe would have swept together and entombed such an incredible mass of insect parts with the carapaces of countless tiny crustaceans, fish scales, plate remains, and plant "hash."

If you did swallow the absurdity of insect wings surviving in a volcanic ash flow, this might make sense. I would point out that there are other, much more likely scenarios that would produce the Belmont Insect Beds. It definitely requires gentle conditions, otherwise the insects wings would simply not survive. The conchostracans are also consistent with the environment being very

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quiet. Similarly the fine-grained, stratified deposit indicated quiet conditions. Quiet conditions and time are a far more plausible explanation of how the Belmont Insect Beds formed than the silly notion of a volcanic flow that was violent enough to rip the wings off of insects but delicate enough not to crush those wings to a pulp.

More selective data

Directly beneath this volcanic ash bed, deposited over an enormously extensive area, is a coarse, water-worn pebble conglomerate, and sandstone with the fossilized remains of the tree trunks whose violently stripped foliage very soon became the plant remains and "hash" in the volcanic ash. Above, the strata include the great thicknesses of plant debris making up coal seams, buried by further violently transported conglomerate masses.

Again, Snelling doesn't want to tell you everything because it contradicts his story. What he says here is partially true; there is a conglomerate under the insect beds and a coal seam above. There is no evidence what-so-ever that the leaves were violently stripped from the trunks of the trees whose stumps are preserved in the sediments below the Belmont Insect Beds. What he neglects to tell you is that there are also tree stumps **above** the insect beds still standing where they grew in life. And not just isolated examples, but thousands of them spread over the full thickness of the 3km of sediments. Clearly these are from trees that grew and died in-situ. For Snelling's flood to be true, thousands

of trees somehow had to grow from seedlings to maturity in the turbulent sediments at the bottom of the oceans in the flood. Further they had to complete their growth and be buried all within one year (the period of the great flood as proposed by creationists).

Why would Snelling forget to tell you that? Because it indicates that the sediments on top of the insect beds took a long time to accumulate. There is no conceivable way that even a single tree could have grown from seed to maturity within one year under flood conditions. Thousands of them, some on top of others, only complicate the issue. Snelling knows this and so neglects to tell you that the evidence exists.

Flies and lies

This Australian fossil insect bed, therefore, bears eloquent testimony to the devastation during the Genesis Flood.

No it doesn't! Snelling's essay bears damning testimony to the kinds of lies and half-truths that creationists are prepared to tell in order to give their religious dogma some support. A more thorough examination of all the evidence surrounding the Belmont Insect Beds provides conclusive evidence against a biblical flood.

When I first posted this on the intelligent design forum, I accompanied it with a challenge; why should any one believe any creationist material when examination of that material reveals lies and distortions? I've yet to receive a satisfactory answer. My rebuttal to Snelling's essay also went without comment from any of the creationist participants on the discussion list.

It brings me back to the old saying "Never try to teach a pig to sing; it wastes your time and annoys the pig".

Notes

1. <http://www.intelligentdesign.org/Guestbook/guestbook.html>.
2. <http://www.icr.org/pubs/imp/imp-329.htm>.

