



# Prologue

## How I Discovered the Smaller Majority

**W**E ARE BORN WITHOUT THE FEAR OF NATURE. Young children are fascinated with life around them, equally intrigued by a caterpillar or a dog. The fear of most creatures is instilled in us later in life by overly protective parents or teachers, peer pressure, and misguided media. By the age of ten most children either love or hate insects and other tiny organisms, and these feelings usually stay with them for the rest of their lives. I could never understand why small animals, including most amphibians and reptiles, evoke such polarized feelings. After all, how many people hate jaguars or elephants, things that can really hurt you? I think it can be explained in part by what psychologists call “prepared learning”—we are quick to learn the fear of snakes because millions of years of human evolution have favored individuals inclined to avoid them, even if most snakes are not venomous. But what about moths, spiders, or beetles? Why do most people find these animals repulsive, yet happily gorge on lobsters? When you think about it, their morphology is remarkably alike. Perhaps the negligible proportion of small animals that are indeed harmful to us has had a similar selective effect on our psyche, favoring fear of the small over trust and curiosity?

Most of animal life on Earth is small. Over 90 percent of known species are smaller than a human finger, smaller, in fact, than your fingernail. Our perspective on reality is severely handicapped by our gargantuan size, rare giants surrounded by the smaller majority. Our enormous size prevents us from appreciating, or even noticing, most of what shares this planet with us and forces us to focus our attention on other equally large, or larger, creatures. We proclaim kinship with wolves and deer, even while we hold our breath before squeezing the trigger, and cultures across the globe revere eagles, bears, and lions, but few pay any attention to lizards and snails. Size is the great divider, rooted in our atavistic need to conquer and subjugate, and small things are more easily dismissed as not worthy of serious attention. Tiny creatures are lumped into general categories of bugs, creepy-crawlies, or vermin, and at best are described as “strange,” “bizarre,” or “alien.” But we forget that humans are the most recent arrival on this planet, peculiar products of evolution who have somehow escaped the rules that govern normal species’ distribution and population growth.

With large animals everything is simpler—direct observations and experience have taught us that tigers can kill and turkeys make a good meal. With small things we lack either the patience or the ability to make observations, and end up drawing false, often ridiculous conclusions. And because we do not understand small creatures, we fear them. People in Madagascar are afraid of chameleons even though they have lived surrounded by these innocent animals for thousands of years. In Zimbabwe I met highly educated men who dread harmless blue-tailed skinks, considering them extremely venomous.

North American and European cultures are no better, fostering beliefs that daddy longlegs are venomous or that milk snakes steal milk from cows.

Unlike most mammals, who live in a sensual world dominated by scents, ours is a species that relies on vision. Eyes help us make emotional connection with other people as well as other species. We prefer animals that can return our gaze, which puts many smaller organisms, some of which may have “too many” eyes or none at all, at a great disadvantage in the struggle for our affection. But even as a young child I suspected that the smaller the animal, the more fascinating it must be, even if you cannot look directly into its eyes. And I am sure it had nothing to do with the fact that I was the smallest boy in my class, with thick glasses and a nickname: “The Bug.”

In 1988 I took a break from college in my native Poland, and after twelve grueling months of bartending, washing dishes, picking berries, and painting walls, I finally saved enough money to embark on my first tropical voyage, one that would take me first to countries of Southeast Asia and later to Africa. It was the beginning of a much longer journey that has covered six continents, one that I hope to continue until I am old and incapacitated. It is a journey both on the surface of our beautiful planet and in spatial dimensions tens and hundreds of times smaller than the world we live in. This book is a collection of my travel snapshots.

On its pages I attempt to celebrate everything that is small and misunderstood. I pointedly ignore organisms typically portrayed in popular natural history writing and photography. Thus, there are no birds and mammals here, and most organisms I have photographed would fit inside a matchbox. There are a