



Moralesi's Claim to Fame

It is said that when the British biologist J.B.S. Haldane was asked if there was anything that could be concluded about the Creator from the study of Nature he quipped: "An inordinate fondness for beetles". After all, over one-quarter of all species on earth are beetles. *Zophosis moralesi*, your guide through these columns, is a humble little beetle, seemingly just ordinary among such a multitude. So, what is Moralesi's claim to fame?

As every Namib toktokkie knows, they are famous. Not so Moralesi, though it has the distinction of being one of the 176 species of the genus *Zophosis*, aka Zippy Tortoise Beetles, notable for zig-zagging restlessly about during the heat of the day in search of food. However, not even running brings Moralesi fame. That goes to the Dune-Sprinting *Onymacris*, the fastest running insect in the world, right here in the Namib (for its size, its equivalent speed would be like a person running at 360 kilometres per hour!). Fame for fog-basking goes to two other *Onymacris*, the black and the pied, these being the only beetles in the world known to fog-bask. Fog-Trench *Lepidochora* do it another way, they dig trenches then scoot up and down these, looking like little First-World-War helmets in action. In reality, they are drinking fog water which collects in the trench, as much as one-third of their own body weight at a time. For Moralesi, collecting fog is too nebulous, except while it is a larva, when it absorbs moisture from humid air at night, which it collects, believe it or not, with its tail! Does drinking through the tail bring fame?

Moralesi is, indeed, remarkable, though not much more so than other creatures that thrive in this desert. For instance, when you see Moralesi running on the ground that is too hot for you and me to stand on barefoot, you know why it is called Zippy Tortoise Beetle as it hotfoots across the plains. It loves the heat, but so do several other Namib insects in the 50-plus degrees Celsius class. Moralesi holds its breath for a long time to conserve precious water when exhaling, perhaps only breathing every 20 minutes and remaining chirpy even when it has lost up to half of its body fluids through dehydration. Yes, this tiny tot can live over six years, only running out of life when it has run out of legs, as it wears them down to stumps, finally reaching a permanent halt. And yes, at 1 centimetre in size, Moralesi may not measure up to much against a car tyre and may not be able to bear its weight, but it sure is tougher than the toughest Goodyear!

Moralesi has a much larger claim to fame. Through its tenacity and sheer toughness it demonstrates by example that life itself is awe-inspiring, and harbours bigger lessons than we can dream up, and bigger responsibilities for it than we may realise. That moral is Moralesi's claim to fame.

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