

JAPAN

# BUGS

By Maggie E. Kinser

Photos by Robert McLeod



*Different culture, different pets; a giant stag beetle may not be your idea of beauty, but little Japanese boys have traditionally found the crawlers attractive as pets.*

*Whether she and the kabutomushi at right, enjoying a bit of simulated tree sap, can continue to be popular in the intensely urban world of modern Japan, is a point of concern for insect auctioneers.*

A white box, two feet long and a foot wide, clips along an elevated wooden track flanked by 12 men seated on a grubby vinyl-covered bench. Leathery faces bristly with Friday morning stubble pivot; a dozen pair of eyes so well trained as to be lackadaisical peruse its contents as it clatters past.

A speaker crackles as an auctioneer plugs the merchandise: "Seven centimeters — a real beauty from Kyushu!" A beauty indeed — supporting her glossy sepia exoskeleton on six sturdy legs, this future mother has a seven-year lifespan, and may bring in a good ¥28,000 (US\$200) retail. The goods: a single female *okuwagata mushi*, or giant stag beetle. The place: the All-Japan Insect Market. The occasion: the season's first auction. The object: to deal. In live bug eggs, larvae, pupae, and adults.

As you stroll the steamy summer streets of Tokyo, or any town in Japan, keep your eye out for what strikes most non-Japanese as odd, even repulsive items to build a pet business on. And keep your mind open. For the insect industry, like nearly everything in this country except perhaps Mickey Mouse and pizza, has a long history — a meaning reaching far beyond mere words — and a truly devoted following whose memories and sense of mission motivate them more than cold cash ever could.

Now, lest the stick call the stone primitive, note that in Europe and North America, while playing with insects is discouraged, children amuse themselves with various types of rodents (a practice which has only recently begun to catch on in Japan). To Japanese kids, bugs are just pets; their pictures appear in school notebooks, dozens of books are published about them each year, and children always "promise to take care of it, Mom!"

"Today, if you ask a child where *kabuto mushi* (beetles) come from, he'll answer, 'a department store,'" says Shizuo Kunai, 53, the president of the All-Japan Insect Market and an influential figure in the business. Yosuke Hashidate, one of Seibu Department Store's big buyers, holds parents responsible for the spreading ignorance of Mother Nature's six-legged children and their





habits, and for the social implications of this apathy. "People now are so concerned with sending their kids to the right school, so they'll get in the right university and get the right job, that they forget to instruct them about nature. Of course, I always teach the kids as much as I can when they buy a pet, but I wonder if that's enough to convince them that living things aren't toys; they aren't like computers. You have to understand how they live in the wild. And how to take care of them."

Like millions of other Japanese, Hashidate feels a special attachment to insects — one that has been forming not only since his own childhood, but literally for centuries.

"Three hundred years ago, when the business began, it was the singing insects that people bought," says Kunai. "It was a complete novelty. At first, the collectors went in August where it was already cool — up north or to the higher elevations — to gather *kantan* (Japanese tree crickets), *matsu musubi* (crickets), and *suzu musubi* ("bell-



*The steps in the life of a beetle (top). Many of the insects sold in Japanese cities are "ranchled." Trained eyes examine a basket of beetles at an All-Japan Insect Market auction. Living up to seven years, a single female stag beetle can fetch a surprising price.*

ring" insects). Then they brought them down into the cities, so that merely by listening, one could feel a sense of relief from the oppressive heat — in the very midst of it."

When demand overcame ready supply, the most innovative collectors researched their way to efficient insect "farming" methods, by which they controlled the insects' environment in order to satisfy a longing anyone who has experienced even a single summer in Japan knows all too well. But for the Japanese, says Kunai, the experience is unique: "The song of the suzu mushi reminds one of *furin* (wind chimes) stirred by a cool autumn breeze marking the end of another summer. It evokes Japanese sentiments of *wabi* and *sabi*," said Kunai. "That peace and tranquility experienced through the simple pleasure of listening to the crickets crying out into the heavy August air — it is the essence of autumn, at the height of summer."

This is a ritual which seems as appropriate to the Japanese character as it is inappropriate to the seasons, exhibiting on one hand an agricultural people's sincere appreciation for Mother Nature's charms; and, on the other, the very Japanese tendency to cultivate them to symbolic ends.

In times gone by, those well equipped to enjoy such refined pleasures — the nobility, the warrior class, and the rich merchants — were the target market for the lyrical pets, which were kept in delicately crafted wooden cages still replicated in the 20th-century. Also of noble heritage were the insect vendors of the day; many were second and third sons of samurai, left to shift for themselves in a class-conscious world where the first-born son alone held the right and obligation to inherit his father's position. Today, suzu mushi and matsu mushi, the insects with the longest commercial history, are all farmed, and many insect farmers can still trace their heritage to those enterprising sons of the samurai.

Times have changed. Now there is an official "bug season" (from the spring equinox to *obon*, a Japanese holiday held on or around August 15 to honor one's ancestors), during which the decade-old All-Japan Insect Market does an annual average of ¥100 million (US\$720,000) and one billion insects' worth (in 200-300 varieties) of rather sophisticated wholesaling. Other distribution channels do exist. Besides the professional bug breeders, there are farmers today who collect and sell insects to supplement their income, and there are the middlemen who are as indispensable to the bug trade as to any other enterprise in Japan.

The outdoor stalls that follow the summer *ma-tsuri* (festivals) through the country selling chirping katydid and such now face competition from the stationary merchants of an industrial age; bugs

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Yours sincerely,



George Pokrovsky  
Publisher



*A tray of beetle pupae get the professional once-over at an auction. These men, often with a long history in the bug-selling world, are faced with an uncertain future. Will their profession, like their insects, shed its old form for new, or simply fade away? Well, there is something charming about a tank-like little beetle (opposite) — perhaps tomorrow's children will feel the same way.*

with cages, ¥1,500 on the average, can be found at pet and flower shops, and on the roof-top pet floors of department stores. Now you can even satisfy that Saturday night urge for a powerful kabuto mushi in the disco district of Roppongi, where fruit shops sell them alongside Australian kiwifruit.

The typical 20th-century customer is a boy between seven and twelve years old, and his favorite bugs are beetles. Little Japanese girls, with their charming manners, impeccably pressed school uniforms and be-ribboned pigtailed, tend to buy snails. The mercantile aspect of the beetle's history is but a moment relative to that of the eloquent cricket. Only 25 years ago, department stores found a receptive audience for the little armored guys, who bring back glory not only in warlike character, but in name as well. The *birat-sukawagata mushi* takes its appellation from the famous Taira, or Heiki family, the noble opponent

(and loser) to the house of Genji in one of Japan's greatest medieval battles. The dark brown kabuto mushi indeed resembles its namesake: the samurai helmet.

Naturally, a boy and his beetle, the latter with built-in lance and armor, will always be a great pair. A respectable Japanese citizen in his mid-twenties describes the cushy life his pets led when he was beetle-battle champion of his Kobe neighborhood. "My bugs lived in a big wooden cage, were bedded with sawdust, ate watermelon, and drank sugar water from the cotton swabs I put in the indentations of small log pieces in the bottom of their cages. They got pretty strong, and every now and then the kids in the neighborhood would all get their bugs out and let them walk around and fight each other." The first beetle to be overturned by his opponent in these contest loses.

A crate of kuwagata mushi would have brought

a better price five or six years ago. Cries of “Computes, computers, anyone for a good computer today?!” go up among the old buyers. The sarcasm in their voices is tinged with despondency; the insect industry, which hasn’t really been profitable for the last hundred years, draws people who love animals, not just money. The end of this era would be, they say, just another sign of the dying concern for living things.

Shizuo Kunai doesn’t doubt that the present form of the bug business may well be on its last legs. But the industry, like an insect itself, is only passing naturally from one stage to another. What we are witnessing, he says, is only the next metamorphosis. Kunai himself spends every free weekend on a rented bulldozer in Gumma Prefecture, trying to create what is in effect his life’s work—the creation of an insect park, where he will farm insects and provide them with an environment in which they can proliferate naturally. But most importantly to the grand scheme, there will be a place especially for kids to gather not only insects, but understanding as well.

“Actually, if you know the insects’ habits you can find them in the daytime, too, although most people think you can only catch them at night by coating their favorite kind of tree with *sake* and honey. This park will be a place where children

learn some practical science — general biology. If city kids could just come to a place like this, I know they would become more interested in nature.”

Kunai is not sure yet if he will have to charge admission, but he plans to advertise the park through tour companies and to encourage school-sponsored field trips.

In high-tech Japan, where even stuffed toys are computerized and every kid owns a digital watch, there is something very touching about a grown man making a big deal out of little bugs. ■



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