

Insect of the week (83) Afromelecta lieftrincki Eardley (Hymenoptera: Apoidea: Apidae)

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Afromelecta lieftincki was described in 1991 by Connal Eardley, one of Africa's premier experts on bees. Eardley is perhaps best known for his work on the Apidae of southern Africa and he revised the tribe Melectini to which *Afromelecta* belongs. Although biological information is not available for *A. lieftincki* in particular, all known records of the closely associated genus *Thyreus* indicate that *Afromelecta* is a cleptoparasitoid of ground-nesting solitary bees. *Afromelecta lieftincki* is a large bee, the body of the holotype male (females are unknown) measuring 12.5 mm. It is extremely rare.

The species featured here is known from a single male specimen the collection data for which has apparently led to some confusion. In his 1991 review of the tribe Melectini Eardley quotes the label information for this specimen as follows;

'Kenya, Machacos, Wa-Kamba, 1600 m, Museum de Paris, Mission de l'Omo, C. Arambourg, P.A. Chappuis & R. Jeannel, 1923-1933', MNHN. The meaning of this information is that the specimen was collected in Machakos (Misspelled as Machacos) in the area of the Kamba people at an elevation of 1600 meters above sea level, by the collectors C. Arambourg, P.A. Chappuis & R. Jeannel sometime between 1923-1933 during a project called the Mission to the Omo River area, the insect being deposited in the National Museum of Natural History (Paris). Machakos is both a town and an area name and is, in fact, where we collected our specimen of A. lieftincki, in a woodland along the road from Machakos to Kitui, in eastern Kenya. So far, so good. It is quite possible that the three explorers drove inland on the main road during the journey up from the coast of Kenya and did some collecting along the way to the Omo River which is as far northwest as you can get and still be in Kenya. The Omo is the main (often only) permanent source of water flowing from Ethiopia into Lake Turkana, the world's largest desert lake. That area is an important source of hominid fossils (along with those of many other animals). The map and accompanying text of the distribution for Afromelecta lieftincki suggests that Earley may have misread the label information and confused the name of the project with the name of the actual collection site of the bee (Machakos area). In Eardley's description of the species he states 'The species is known from a single locality in north-west Kenya', and the accompanying map also indicates north-west Kenya as the place where the collection was made, some 600 plus kilometres from the Machakos area. Why the apparent collection dates are given as 1923-1933 is also strange. The long and short of this is that if you want to go looking for *Afromelecta lieftincki* you are better off looking in the Machakos area.