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## The bio-comedian

Posted by [Jef Akst](#)

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It may be hard to find the humor in biology for researchers crouched over lab benches or dozing through yet another conference presentation. What's so funny about biology? Plenty, if you ask ecologist-turned-comedian [Tim Lee](#), who draws on years of formal scientific training and research experience to spin the banalities of biology into standup success. Lee features the sometimes tedious PowerPoint medium popular for presenting scientific research as his main comedic prop.

"I think the concept of combining the PowerPoint with comedy is long overdue," says [Jay Barlow](#), a marine mammal biologist at Southwest Fisheries Science Center (SWFSC) in La Jolla CA and Lee's former supervisor. "He melds the two wonderfully."

Lee's first foray into comedy occurred in 2002 when a laundromat in San Francisco hosted an open mic night. Lee "had very high hopes but very little expectations" for his comedic debut, and it went okay, he says. "Overall I had a few jokes that hit, [but] maybe 60% didn't do very well." But mild success wasn't good enough for Lee, who went to another open mic night the very next week, this time in the back of a Chinese restaurant. Nine months later, he landed his first paid gig at The Crow's Nest, a restaurant and bar in Santa Cruz.

Now, almost a decade after earning his PhD in ecology and evolution from the University of California Davis, Lee considers himself a fulltime comedian, performing an average of three comedy shows per week in venues around his home in Los Angeles. "The shows are filling up," Lee says, "I'm getting a lot of fan email." He has even worked alongside superstar comedians Dave Chappelle and Robin Williams, who he remembers watching -- and admiring -- as a kid.

Lee began doing scientific research as an undergrad at the University of California, San Diego, where he investigated the effects of parasites on Brewer's blackbirds. "I was a very driven student once I got to college," Lee says. Indeed, as a junior he was one of the top students in ecologist [Barbara Taylor's](#) conservation biology class of almost 300 students. And the next year, in smaller, higher-level course on conservation modeling, "there was Tim, right there at the top," Taylor recalls.

After a two-year break from school to work for the SWFSC, Lee headed north to UC Davis, where he earned his PhD studying extinction modeling and salmon population dynamics. Late in his graduate career Lee realized science wasn't for him: "The first three years were great," he remembers. "The last three years were hell."

On the advice of his mentor, Lee chose a dissertation topic that he "wasn't really interested in" simply because it was funded, and is convinced that this decision ultimately turned him off to scientific research. "I do wish I had taken charge of my destiny more in graduate school," Lee says, vowing to not repeat the mistake in his comedy career. "It's one of those things that you live and learn from."

And learn he has -- according to his former scientific colleagues, Lee seems to have found his calling in comedy. "He's hysterical," Barlow says. "[And] it does have a broader appeal even though the nonscientists probably don't get the fact that the science that he's presenting is actually accurate."

Image: [Tim Lee](#)

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"[There was] clearly a very wide spectrum of people that were there," Taylor says of a Lee performance that she recently attended. "People were loving it. [Lee's comedy] seems to cut across very different cultures."

In addition to incorporating science into his act, Lee also uses it offstage, applying the statistics he learned in school to analyze his development as a comedian. There are two types of errors, he explains -- type 1 and type 2. The first is when people quit when they shouldn't, and the second is when people never quit even when they really should. "I didn't want to make the second one," he says. So he kept a log of every set he'd ever done, noting how well the jokes did and analyzing the results. "I figured as long as I was improving I shouldn't quit." Seeing his progress in "a quantitative fashion" motivated him to keep moving forward, he says.

"It's wonderful to see someone be successful in something as different [from science] as comedy," Taylor says. "I'd love to see him give a science talk because I think he'd knock 'em dead there too," Barlow adds.

Lee will be performing at the Punch Line in San Francisco on August 4th, the Hermosa Beach Playhouse in Hermosa, CA on September 12th, and the Throckmorton Theater in Mill Valley, CA on October 4th. He has also just finished writing a movie script, currently entitled *Animal Attraction*, about an awkward scientist who learns how to meet women by studying animal behavior.

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