Incautious fly makes an unhappy landing on a Venus Fly Trap. This is the moment before the trap snaps shut.
THE MEN WHO CAN PHOTOGRAPH ANYTHING

The diminutive dramas of nature take outsze skills to capture on film. Only wizards can bring you close-ups like these to your sitting room screen. Robert K. G. Temple goes to see the innovators

Leopard frog caught upside-on water as it leaps between two elements

From left below: Greater Horseshoe bat in hot pursuit of moth, Harvest mouse climbs a grass stalk, Cuttlefish emerges from chrysalis, Birth of a jellyfish.
No one is actually in charge but there are seven principals. They amble about in short slacks and moments with their mugs of coffee, they are inclined to carry human skeletons or poisonous spiders.

"We all have a warped sense of humour here," says one. But their work is no joke. Oxford Scientific Films, as this company of brilliant individuals calls itself, are known less for their name than for what they produce — which is admired by every watcher of TV nature programmes, or even of commercials and science fiction movies. Christopher Parsons, head of the BBC's rival Natural History Unit, calls the group "surely the most technically advanced biological film unit in the world."

Based a few miles north of Oxford, the enterprise got its start when a group of academics from the university joined forces 13 years ago. But they have long ceased to be just the company that brought you the pike eating the stickleback, or the birth of a jellyfish. Their team is now responsible for special effects in films like Superman, Alien and Flash Gordon. It was also involved in producing the Cadbury's commercial where the camera descends into the groove of a bar of chocolate and runs along it as in a canyon. Another current commercial of theirs is the old Esso service station that is wrecked and replaced by a new one within seconds. Several months of time-lapse photography went into that one.

In their world, the OSF team are known as the men who can film anything. There seems to be no limit to their technical ingenuity. This is largely due to the abilities of their genius-in-residence, Peter Parks. Even at OSF, where brilliance is taken for granted, everybody is in awe of Parks. Aged 40, he is the inventor of the optical bench, and a pioneer of snorkel periscope photography. He designs and invents lenses, tubes, arrays, cranes, gyroscopic combinations and tracking equipment. He is an innovator in the Victorian art of "dark-field illumination" for filming purposes. Artist for his own designs, he was once the chief natural history illustrator for the Illustrated London News. Now he is writing a novel, and is planning a film epic which would have a budget of several million pounds. This year, Parks won a "technical Oscar" in Hollywood — he is entirely self-taught in cinematography.

The senior figure at OSF is the genial, perpetually amused Gerald Thompson. Although he will retire this year, he will remain an active consultant. He can hardly do anything else — OSF's buildings
Special apparatus for close-up, galactoscope and cosmoscope.

27. All the OSF team seem to share this penchant for a good twist in a twisted joke. Sometimes romance blossoms. Thompson's son, David Thompson, the leading OSF cameraman, met an attractive local girl for five hours on an expedition to Costa Rica. She couldn't speak a word of English nor had she ever been there. She was a native, however. Spanish. Thompson was enchanted and later she came to live in Oxfordshire. When the first film was released, she was seen on the screen with her arms around Thompson's shoulders. But once she was out of the picture, she left the country. Thompson is now considering whether to make a sequel to his first film. It is said that he is thinking of making a third film, which will be released next year.

28. The OSF team are incredibly hardy as they travel the world. They have been known to travel for months on end, often sleeping in the open, with only a blanket and a sleeping bag for protection. They have been praised for their ability to survive in some of the most treacherous conditions. However, they are also known to have a sense of humor, often joking with each other about their adventures.

Dr John Cooke provoked a tarantula to spray hairs into his arm, which swelled up the size of a tennis ball, and arranged for another scientist to cut a chunk out of his arm for investigation under a microscope.