

BOOK REVIEW

An Introduction to the Spiders of South East Asia, With Notes on All the Genera. Frances and John Murphy. 2000. Malaysian Nature Society, P.O. Box 10750, 50724 Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia, vii + 625 pp., ca. US\$34 (yes, \$34!) plus postage.

This is a most remarkable book, quite unlike anything previously produced on spiders. It isn't exactly a field guide, although it contains over 250 color images of spiders taken by one of the most talented photographers ever to grace our field, Frances Murphy, and its discussions of taxa are organized in ways to make them maximally useful to collectors and field biologists. It isn't exactly an identification manual, even of the "How to Know the Spiders" ilk, for there are no dichotomous keys (or genitalic illustrations for species identification) to be found anywhere between its covers. But it is exactly what the title indicates – a superb introduction to the spiders of a significant chunk of the world.

That chunk is somewhat curiously defined; the book covers, as one would expect, Vietnam, Cambodia, Laos, Thailand, and Myanmar. But it also covers Sumatra, Java, Borneo, and even the Philippines. Even more surprisingly, a large part of southern China, and Taiwan, are included (although the authors admit that, in retrospect, some of the Chinese provinces covered have faunas with more northern affinities and don't fit well).

In any case, the volume will be of interest to arachnologists everywhere, for it includes a number of unique features. Perhaps most obvious is the plethora of habitus drawings; I doubt that there is any other work that includes so many fine drawings of the entire bodies of such a varied cast of characters (many of these drawings are by the world-renowned spider illustrator Michael Roberts, and were especially commissioned for the book). In some cases, these are probably the first habitus drawings ever to appear for given taxa (such as the family Cithaeronidae).

Also unique is the organization, especially in the treatments of the larger families. Take, for example, the araneids. First discussed are a number of rare genera that include only one or two species; in most cases, no information on these taxa has appeared since their original description (often a century ago), and little can be said about these animals. For more modern taxa, likely errors are often pointed out; so, for example, a Chinese species described in the New World genus *Eustala* in 1990 is suggested to be closer to *Cyclosa* instead (and in this case, a transfer of the species to that genus has actually been published, in an obscure Chinese journal).

For the genera more likely to be recognized, the treatments are arranged by where the spiders' webs are most likely to be found: on vegetation, on dead twigs or bare branches, or at the ground layer. One genus, the curious *Chorizopes*, is even separated out as being found in leaf litter – I was not aware of that, or that these spiffy animals spin no webs and instead prey on other spiders! The authors have spent a considerable amount of time collecting and observing spiders in southeast Asia, and the book is chock-full of such tidbits of natural history information. For that reason, as well as an often delightfully sly turn of phrase, even the most detailed parts of the text are quite readable. With regard to *Cithaeron*, for example, we're told that "When disturbed, their main defence against even the most experienced collectors is an unreasonable turn of speed."

As introductory material, to help newcomers to the field, the book includes brief accounts of the other arachnid orders (even those which don't occur in southeast Asia),

spider anatomy, natural history, and collecting techniques. The liphistiids, mygalomorphs, and araneomorphs are treated separately; but within the two large infraorders, the families are listed alphabetically, which leads to some strange juxtapositions (anapids are thus found between amaurobiids and anyphaenids, rather than with mysmenids or symphytognathids). But tables of “field hints for families” will help the novice navigate through this huge compendium of information.

After the family discussions, there is a full checklist of species recorded from the area, comprising over 80 pages, with detailed geographic data. The bibliography is extensive (another 35 pages), and there are useful lists of societies, periodicals, a glossary, and a detailed index. The book is capped by 32 gorgeous color plates of photographs, mostly by Frances Murphy. Those of us fortunate enough to have known Frances regret immensely that she did not survive to see this publication, but it is a most impressive tribute to her unflagging enthusiasm, and to her desire to communicate that enthusiasm to others. Indeed, as John Murphy aptly phrases it, he “became an arachnologist by marriage” (a fate with which I can readily sympathize, since I became one by courtship instead)!

As with any project this large, there are always items about which one could carp (*Cylocosmia* is known from Thailand as well as

China; the accounts of *Crassignatha* on pp. 83 and 221, for example, imply that there is some controversy about the family-level relationships of the genus, when there is only a difference in the relative ranking of groups involved). But, on the whole, typographical and other errors are quite uncommon, and they fade into total insignificance when one considers that this enormously useful volume has been made available at a price that seems impossibly low. There is surely no better bargain to be had, for the selling price is an entire order of magnitude lower than that of some similarly large volumes! For this feat, both the authors and the publisher (Mr. Henry Barlow of the Malaysian Nature Society) are to be congratulated heartily (potential purchasers may wish to contact Mr. Barlow at hsbar@pc.jaring.my, or P.O. Box 10139, 50704 Kuala Lumpur, for details on exchange rates, postage options, and payment methods). I suspect that the inexpensive availability of such a remarkably useful volume will lead to a substantial increase in interest in, and work on, the southeast Asian arachnid fauna, and in the end, there could be no more appropriate tribute to Frances Murphy than that!

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