

British Arachnological Society



The Newsletter

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XII International Congress of Arachnology Brisbane, Australia, 12th–17th July, 1992

by Paul Selden

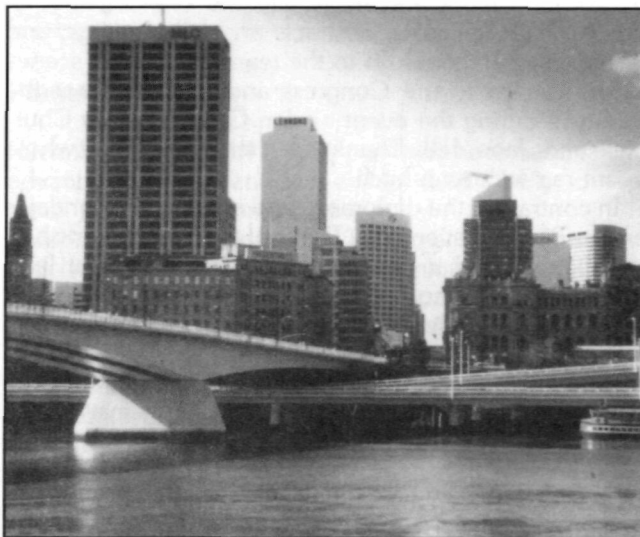
12th July 1992: a cold and frosty morning, with a low sun beginning to burn off the mist which had collected overnight on the meadows. Two buckets of hot water and the car was de-iced; we were on the road, heading through New England, then down the spectacular Cunningham Gap accompanied by the clinking of Bell-birds, and so on to Brisbane. Others had more eventful journeys to the XII International Arachnological Congress, held this year in Brisbane, Queensland. On registration at Lennons Hotel, we met colleagues from the U.S.A. minus luggage, and one (female) participant who had braved the outback winter and travelled from Perth, some 3,500 km, by motor bike! By whatever means, arachnologists gathered to meet old friends, not seen for perhaps three years, and to make new ones. Australia and New Zealand were well represented, of course, but many Europeans also made the trip; there were fewer North American colleagues than I had hoped to see, but Africa, Asia and South America were well represented.

Lennons was the conference hotel: a high rise block that could not have been more centrally situated. The conference was held in the Queensland Museum, part of an impressive complex along the south bank of the River Brisbane, just a short walk across Victoria Bridge from the hotel and the traffic-free shopping streets. Brisbane has enjoyed a well-planned programme of modernisation recently, centred on the south bank site, which includes the Art Gallery, Performing Arts Complex and State Library, in addition to the Queensland Museum. Also here is the 1988 Expo site, complete with jungle and seaside (100 m of golden sand, lapping waves and full-time lifeguard!).

The conference programme swept us along all week, with never a moment to spare (nor a dull one!). At the welcoming reception, canapés were accompanied with champagne, wine, tinnies¹ and good cheer. By now, it was practically impossible to locate colleagues in the crowd since almost everyone had bought a conference sweat-shirt, and so the wearing of name badges was made compulsory. The first morning of talks began with a keynote address by yours truly. It nearly didn't happen at all because, following a last minute check that my slides were all upright and the right way round, I upturned the carousel, scattering them across the floor of the main thoroughfare into the lecture hall. (Moral: if you think you did it right the first time, don't have second thoughts!)

It would be unfair to many excellent speakers to pick out highlights among the lectures; not only were there parallel sessions, but the programme also changed

almost by the hour (Thanks to the organisers for trying to keep up with these and producing updated addenda sheets regularly.) Nevertheless, I recollect some amusing moments, such as Rudi Jocqué's engaging discussion of the biogeography of the Zodariidae and Bill Humphreys' elegant experiments, using a shaving mirror and an umbrella, to determine whether the function of orb-web stabilimenta is thermoregulatory. No results will be given here — the special issue *Memoirs of the Queensland Museum* will be a fascinating read whether you attended the conference or not, so buy a copy!



Lennons Hotel seen from the south bank of the Brisbane River.

During the conference there was a photographic competition, which brought out not only the excellence of many arachnologists' photographic and artistic skills, but also the mischief in the minds of many — numerous pictures begged humorous captions. There was a prize for the best student presentation, an extraordinarily difficult competition to judge, but top honours went to Gustavo Hormiga for his contribution on the relationship between the Pimoidae and Linyphiidae, with second place to Gabriele Uhl (sperm storage glands in *Pholcus*), and runners-up Tracey Churchill (Tasmanian heathland spider communities) and Monika Müller (sexual dimorphism in orb-weavers). Congratulations to them all!

On Monday evening we had the official opening ceremony, conducted by the Director of the Queensland Museum, Dr Alan Bartholomai, with a welcome from the Chair of the Board of Trustees, Dr Elwyn Hegarty, and an opening address by the Hon. Pat Comben, the Minister for Environment and Heritage. This is probably the moment for me to record our thanks to the Chair of the Organising Committee of the Congress, Robert Raven, for inviting us to Brisbane and laying on such a superb meeting; to the rest of the Organising Committee:



Tracey Churchill and Jan Green.

Val Davies (Queensland), and Mark Harvey, Bill Humphreys and Barbara York Main (Perth) for all the background work and especially the onerous task of dealing with the talks, abstracts and proceedings; and finally, special thanks go to the team behind the scenes in the run-up to the Congress and very much at the forefront during the event — Jan Green, Tracey Churchill and Jane Jell. Thanks to their efforts the whole event ran without a hitch.

In contrast to the diplomacy and sobriety of Monday's event, Tuesday evening's 'Tricks of the Trade' workshop was lighthearted in the extreme. We heard of at least half-a-dozen methods of slowing down live spiders for photography or identification: CO₂ gas (e.g. from a soda siphon), refrigeration, squashing between the base and inverted lid of a petri-dish, ditto in water (or even soda-water! — Kraus), cling-film, sucked against gauze stretched across a funnel attached to a vacuum pump (Coddington), or made dizzy by placing on a record player for a few minutes (Filmer (presumably Bill Haley at 78 r.p.m.!)). Barbara Main amused us with her technique for removing trapdoor spiders from their tunnels; it involves not so much high technology but rather a large spade, a hatchet, strong string, foot-long forceps, and a large jar (and presumably a good explanation for the local constabulary when apprehended carrying this lot). Adam Locket suggested a cheap way of making a blacklight for searching for scorpions by night: replace the fluorescent tube in one of those cheap car-breakdown torches (such as can be bought in Woolworths or got from petrol coupons) with a 6-inch actinic F6T5BLB tube, available from electrical stores. You may think this would be of limited use in the U.K., but Adam went on to suggest the use of 'Da-glo' paint or powder to mark spiders so that their activities can be followed in the dark using the blacklight. But the one tip which held everyone dumbfounded was David Hirst's method of collecting spiders using a diesel truck. The trick, apparently, is this. You park your diesel (a car or a truck will do) on a track near some scrub, leave the engine running and wait (or go to the pub). After some time, inspect the tyres, and you will find many ground-dwelling spiders have been attracted to the vehicle and are climbing around the wheels. David says it works, possibly because of the vibrations produced by the engine, but others wondered whether their grant-awarding body would sanction the purchase of, say, a

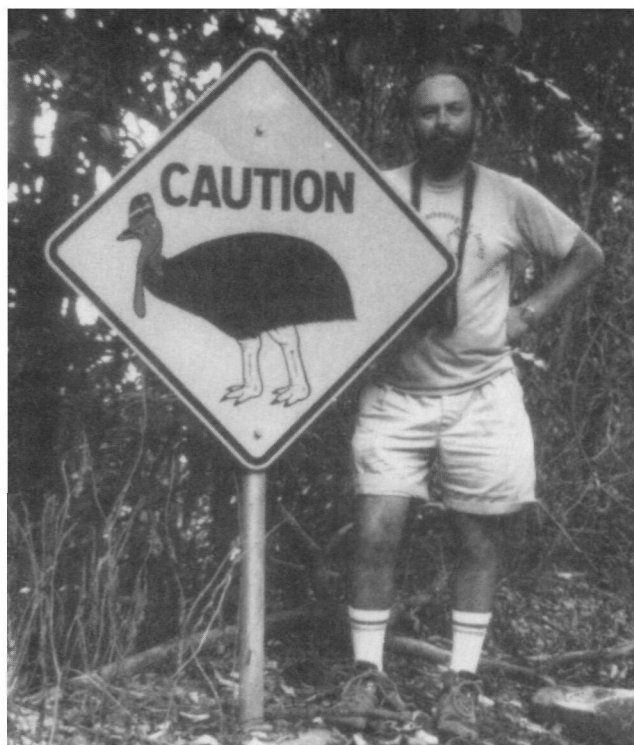
Ford pick-up or, better still, a Bentley for such a purpose.

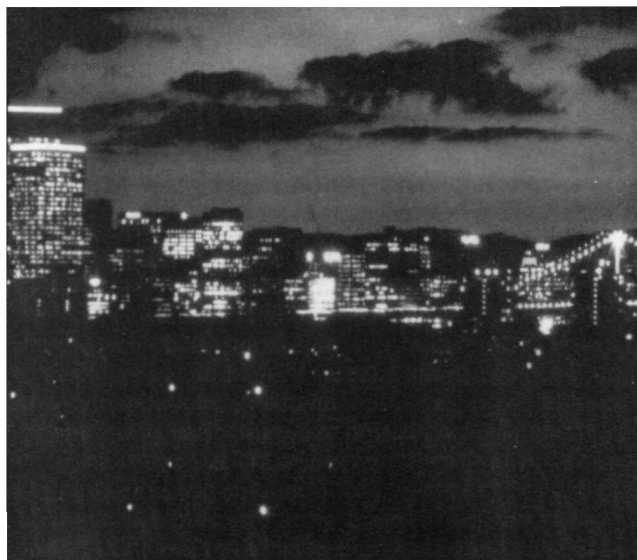
On the Wednesday, we had a day out to O'Reilly's, an isolated settlement in subtropical rainforest some 1,000 m up on the Lamington Plateau (and since this was winter it was rather cool). There were opportunities to walk to an ancient *Nothofagus* forest up on the plateau edge, to explore and collect in the rainforest among the Booyongs and Strangler Figs, or to laze around the guest house, hand-feeding the Rosellas and King Parrots. This is one of those magical places, far too few on this planet, which exceeds all the dreams you have about it before you go there: we saw wallabies and pademelons, Bower-birds and their bowers, magnificent mygalomorph trapdoors, and some very unusual spiders indeed.

The Congress Dinner was a splendid affair held on the umpteenth floor of Lennons Hotel, with an impressive view over night-time Brisbane. Tables were decorated with spiders everywhere (plastic, I hasten to add), including large ones on elastic with which one could demonstrate aerial dispersal by tying them to a large number of helium-filled balloons also present in the centre of each table. A few glasses of wine before, during, and after the meal helped lubricate such activities, and went down well with the excellent spread provided by Lennons. It was not so much a menu, more a natural history of Australia, including Bunya nuts², Moreton Bay bugs³, and yabbies⁴ — all very tasty; even the chicken was good.

Though it was sad to leave Brisbane, for many the Congress did not end on Friday for there was a further delight in store — the post-Congress excursion. Two possibilities were laid on: Fraser Island, the world's largest sand island, with subtropical rainforest, and the one I went on, to Cape Tribulation. To reach Cape Tribulation a flight to Cairns, 1,000 km to the north, was followed by a four-hour bus ride along the unmade road to the Daintree National Park. It was the extension of this road, a single track crossing many crocodile-infested creeks, for logging operations north of Cape Tribulation,

The closest I (right) got to a Cassowary (left).





Brisbane skyline at dusk.

which caused conservationists to blockade the bulldozers in 1987 in an attempt to preserve the fragile rainforest. The road got built, and the run-off from erosion during rains now threatens the inshore coral reefs. But ultimately the Queensland government was made aware of its responsibilities towards the world heritage of which it is custodian. It was just north of here that Cook's ship *Endeavour* struck a reef, forcing him ashore for six weeks to make repairs; he named Cape Tribulation and Mount Sorrow, which overlooks it, after his troubles. But to an arachnologist this is 'the nearest to paradise I'll ever get', as Kefyn Catley bluntly put it. The tropical rainforest runs down to the Coral Sea; in places a thin strip of Coconut palms borders the white sand beach and mangroves fringe muddy creeks — paradise indeed!

The Cape Tribulation settlement consists of a few dwellings, a shop (of sorts), a café (ditto), a solar-powered telephone, and a couple of hostels. Some of us stayed in 6-berth huts at Jungle Lodge, whilst those suffering from the 'conference cold' were quarantined off to Pilgrim Sands. At Jungle Lodge the edge of the forest was just a few yards away over the fence, but Pilgrim Sands was actually inside the forest, so that going out to collect was not necessary; all life came to the cabin door, including a metre-long monitor lizard (begging for scraps, John Murphy told us). The list of spiders seen in my few days here was incredible, not so much the numbers (you still have to look for them — night collecting in the rainforest is a pleasure I shall never forget) but the variety. Particular delights for me were: watching *Deinopsis* making its cat's-cradle web and spreading it wide with its forelegs, waiting patiently and watching with those enormous eyes; finding a discarded *Deinopsis* web in the daytime, like a fisherman's net drying in the sun; lycosid eyes reflecting the head-lamp, and finding they belonged either to a millimetre-long specimen, or to one so big that it needed a coffee jar to catch it in; chasing heteropodids round tree-trunks (these also need a coffee jar); finding that mangrove swamp mud is actually rather firm; marvelling not at the size of *Nephila* but at the exquisite gold of its silk; and discovering that the most beautiful spider in the world is *Cosmophasis*. And then there was the reef — words cannot describe the beauty of the living corals, the reef fish, the experience of swimming with turtles and octopus (this is also the habitat of *Daesis*; I was not

fortunate enough to find one, but then I wasn't really looking too hard).

All good things must come to an end, and by now I was suffering from the dreaded 'conference cold', so after a pleasant afternoon watching Spoonbills and Ospreys in Cairns harbour, a final excellent meal, and a good night's sleep, I waved 'Goodbye' to Australia as the jumbo climbed steadily over the Great Barrier Reef. I don't know when I'll be back to Australia, but already we are looking forward to the next Congress. Rudi Jocqué put it well in his jocular talk during the conference — 'We'll meet again!' Where? In Geneva. When? In 1995. Without doubt it will be a sunny day!

Glossary

¹cans of beer.

²fruit of the Bunya Pine, an araucarian with enormous cones; each cone contains enough 'nuts' to support a man for many days: Aborigines time their walkabouts to coincide with the ripening of the Bunya.

³a type of squat lobster found in Moreton Bay — where the Brisbane River discharges and on the banks of which was the site of the original penal colony of Redcliffe (known to the Aborigines as Humpybong).

⁴freshwater crayfish.

Department of Geology, The University, MANCHESTER, M13 9PL

Points of View

Recently quite a lot of B.A.S. members have been taking advantage of present-day cheap (well, fairly cheap) travel to collect in foreign parts.

John and I went to the C.I.D.A. meeting in Brisbane, which was very interesting and enjoyable, and afterwards stayed on like many participants to travel and collect in the country. In many ways Australia proved to be a pleasant place for the tourist. Roads were good with cars at a density of one every 20 miles. Perhaps I exaggerate, but driving was certainly a lot pleasanter than in England. We stayed in Queensland because it was winter and further south it was pretty chilly.

However, the Australian rules about taking specimens out of the country are very frustrating. I knew this before I went there and, indeed, had avoided going to Australia until this summer for this reason. Now one understands that they do not want their endemic marsupials hunted to extinction for commercial purposes. However, populations of invertebrates, with the possible exception of very fancy butterflies, are highly unlikely to be damaged by collecting. We were given permits to collect for the Museum of Brisbane and told that the collections would be posted on to us for identification. This is a bit annoying because hand-carrying results in much less damage to the specimens than going through the post.

As it was winter there were a lot of fascinating immature spiders and I would have liked to have brought them home to rear, watch and photograph. It was, to me, most distressing to be unable to do this and rather spoilt my pleasure in seeing these interesting creatures.

It might be useful to list the countries which have a more sensible attitude to the collecting of invertebrates. It would be interesting to hear of other people's experiences. Since 1980 we have visited the following countries and brought home small collections of spiders (and occasionally other invertebrates), dead and alive, with no trouble: France, Spain, Greece, United States of America, Kenya, Malaysia, Singapore and New Zealand. In Panama we were asked for \$10 for a permit to collect