

British Arachnological Society



The Newsletter

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XIII International Congress of Arachnology Geneva, Switzerland, 3rd–8th Sept. 1995

by Paul Selden

'We'll meet again!' proclaimed Rudy Jocqué at the end of the previous International Congress of Arachnology in Brisbane in 1992; and so it came to pass in Geneva, with Rudy, as President of the organising body—the Centre International de Documentation Arachnologique (C.I.D.A.), welcoming delegates to this triennial event. One of the hottest summers on record in western Europe had come to a soggy end, but the spirit of the international body of arachnologists is not dampened by meteorological trivia, and a week of lectures, field excursion and social events began with mounting excitement and anticipation.

Delegates from forty-one countries congregated in the Natural History Museum, which is situated in a small, but delightful, park set on a hillside just above the city centre. Among the participants were representatives from Algeria, Argentina, Azerbaijan, China, Colombia, Costa Rica, Cuba, Egypt, Hong Kong, Israel, Kazakhstan, Lithuania, Mexico, New Zealand, Serbia, Slovakia, Slovenia, and the Ukraine. We were accommodated in a variety of lodgings, ranging from small hotels close to the museum to the large and busy student residence a short bus journey (or bracing stroll) away. In the evenings, huddles of arachnologists could be found in most of the small cafés and smart restaurants in the museum hinterland and the old town district. Those with time to spare to explore the old town and the modern centre of Geneva were rewarded with many places of interest to discover in a friendly atmosphere. The cathedral and environs is the highlight of Geneva's old town, and includes a fascinating archaeological excavation in the crypt in which the visitor is taken down through many centuries of human occupation and worship of various forms on the site. The Museum of Art and History, which was to have been the venue for our Congress evening (see later), is a grandiose building housing some fine pieces of European art and, when we were there, a fascinating show of modern works of an indescribable nature. Even Dave Penney, having been dragged reluctantly into the gallery, was so absorbed by his new-found love of European Romantic Landscapes that it was difficult to get him out again! Between the art museum and the cathedral are narrow cobbled streets and delightful squares, where arachnologists could be found hanging about the pavement bars and cafés at most times during the week. Beyond the city centre, with its exclusive perfume and jewellery shops nestling alongside familiar chain stores, lies the lake. With the long ridge of the Jura mountains to the west, the distant peaks of the high Alps forming a backdrop to the east, and the tall, slim fountain rising from the lake surface in the foreground,

this is one of the most impressive settings of any city in the world.

The Congress began with the Welcome Party at the Museum on Sunday evening, where old friends were reunited and new ones made amongst convivial company and many bottles of wine. After the Opening Ceremony at 9 a.m. on Monday morning, the talks started with a series on spider behaviour and, later, on physiology. I particularly remember (for various reasons) a series of talks on lycosid communication and courtship displays, Rainer Foelix's fascinating discussion on 'How do crab spiders bite their prey?' (simple question, not so simple answer), and a series of laboratory experiments investigating how pitfall traps work. As usual, most talks concerned spiders, but we had some interesting contributions on opilionids, scorpions and pseudoscorpions this



day as well. Monday evening and another wine reception, hosted by the city of Geneva. The talks concerned more ecological topics on Tuesday, and my personal recollection is of the vertical distribution of spiders in pine trees, and comparison of the web architecture and prey captured by the common European linyphiids *Frontinellina frutetorum*, *Neriere radiata* and *Linyphia triangularis*. Tuesday evening included a poster session, and among those which interested me was one on the jumping spiders of Greece by Metzner and Helvesen. Heiko Metzner (now at the museum in Karlsruhe) has just finished a thesis on this subject which includes some beautiful drawings; when published, this work will greatly aid identification of salticids from the eastern Mediterranean.

We all looked forward to our outing on Wednesday, and were delighted when the skies cleared and the rain stopped. We set off along the western shore of Lake Geneva (Lac Léman), past the homes of the rich and famous, to our first field locality. The road narrowed as we climbed over limestone ridges to reach a wide valley with a charming, reed-fringed lake in its floor. This was the Lac de Joux, and at its south-western end was a small area of natural forest and reed-beds, which is protected for its natural history interest. With only a short time spent there, little useful spider collecting could be achieved and, with so many people trampling the reeds simultaneously, one wondered whether the habitat would ever recover from this invasion of the arachnologists. Nevertheless, it was a chance for some of our antipodean friends to see for the first time type genera such as *Linyphia*, alongside cosmopolitan familiars like *Araneus*. Following this brief visit, we continued to a splendid reception and lunch at a typical Swiss hostelry. Suitably fed and wine, the coaches set off along even narrower lanes, then bridleways, into the heart of the Parc Jurassien Vaudois, which translates as 'Jurassic Park'. The only large four-legged beasts to be encountered, however, were grass-eating, bell-clanking milkers, but lynx, wild cat and chamois are known to occur here. Serious collecting was again thwarted, as we had to walk a couple of miles in about an hour and a half to reach our transport again, and had to take in a viewpoint on the way. At the viewpoint was a supercolony of the red wood ant (*Formica lugubris*). Since its discovery in 1973, 1,200 giant ant-hills distributed over 70 ha and linked by 100 km of tracks have been described. It has been shown that about 5 per cent of the prey of the ants consists of linyphiids and opilions (mainly young *Mitopus morio*).

Thursday opened with more spider ecology talks, with particular reference to applied ecology and agricultural ecosystems. The afternoon saw a complete change of emphasis, with talks on phylogeny, including cyatholipids, araneids, tetragnathids and theraphosids, as well as some curiosities in the form of John Cloudsley-Thompson's review of why scorpions are the colour they are, and *Brucharachne*—the spider that wasn't—from Norm Platnick. We were due to have a Congress evening at the Museum of Art and History, but unexpected circumstances forced a change of plan. Instead, the scientific colleagues and friends at the Natural History Museum rallied, at exceptionally short notice and on a national holiday, to provide what was one of the most memorable of Congress evenings. Barbecuing skills came to the rescue in the shelter of the museum portal whilst, in the restaurant area, we were treated to traditional Swiss raclette, all washed down with generous amounts of wine and beer. With no formal dinner table or servery, the evening was delightfully casual and conversation relaxed.

After the jollity of the previous evening, there were few early risers on Friday morning to witness Bruno Condé's review of palpigrades 1885–1995, but as the day progressed, we had further interesting talks, and I especially remember Ansie Dippenaar-Schoeman and Astri Leroy's engaging description of the orbweby challenged South African araneid *Pycnacantha*. In the afternoon, biogeography was the theme, with Gondwanan pseudoscorpions, Polynesian spiders, and the Turkmenistan arachnofauna amongst the offerings. Rather than seeing friends trickle away at the end of the day, a final, impromptu wine session was organised, in which previous evenings' discussions could be continued and final farewells made in leisurely fashion. The

evening summed up the meeting as a whole: lively conversation in a convivial atmosphere. Sincere thanks for such splendid organisation go to Volker Mahnert and the organising committee. Special gratitude is also due to the museum staff for putting on excellent fare in difficult circumstances at short notice and quite beyond the call of duty.

I had to wait until Sunday to leave for home, but finding things to do was not difficult. The little square in the old town was holding a festival (postponed from the wet Thursday holiday), and many arachnologists were again to be found sipping coffee or slurping beer at the outdoor cafés between showers. Some made trips to the French Alps and marvelled at the Mer de Glace and the Aiguilles Rouges, whilst others strolled along the lake side and showered under the fountain. It would take longer than a day of calm to reflect upon the proceedings of the previous week. Some exciting new finds had been presented to us, and some rational proposals had to be assimilated in sober mood. C.I.D.A. had pronounced upon the official names for orders of arachnids: we should talk no longer about Solpugida but Solifugae, not Pseudoscorpionida but Pseudoscorpiones. Norm Platnick was voted President of C.I.D.A. for three years to succeed Rudy Jocqué. And where should the next International Congress be held in three years' time? Only one submission had been put to the national correspondents of C.I.D.A.: China. Usually, we have a number of proposals to choose from, so further suggestions were called for. Postal votes are being counted at the moment, so it could be China, Chicago or Cairo. Watch this space!

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Happy Faces and Candy Stripes: The Power of the Vernacular

by Geoff Oxford

Unlike the vast majority of birds, mammals, butterflies and moths, very few spiders have been honoured with common names. The reasons for this are probably varied. Many species are small, darkly coloured and overlooked by most people, and therefore do not need a common name apart from the generic term 'money spider'. But even larger, more colourful spiders are seldom graced with a vernacular name, except the most common and noticeable species living in and around human habitation. The obvious exceptions to this apparent lack of popular interest are spiders dangerous to humans. Who has not heard of Black Widow, Brown Recluse or Sydney Funnel-web Spiders? Clearly, harmful arachnids have accrued names that describe their colour, behaviour or web structure, so that people can be aware of their presence and take necessary precautions. However, common names for spiders are important for other reasons.

A couple of years ago I had the good fortune to spend six months in Hawai'i working on the genetics and evolution of the extensive variation in colour and pattern exhibited by the endemic spider, *Theridion grillator*. Although first described in 1900 by the distinguished French arachnologist Eugène Simon, it wasn't until 1972 that an entomologist discovered an individual on the