

## 18th International Congress of Arachnology, 11th–17th July 2010, Siedlce, Poland

by Paul Selden

Some B.A.S. members will remember Siedlce, some 90 km east of Warsaw, as the venue of the 16th European Colloquium of Arachnology in July 1996, organized by Marek Żabka. This year, Marek repeated his Polish hospitality by hosting the international congress. The International Congress of Arachnology is held every three years, under the auspices of the International Society of Arachnology.

Participants arrived on the Sunday afternoon, after a long, hot, bus journey from Warsaw airport for many people, or an equally hot car drive from different parts of Europe for others. Housing was in the Hotel Janusz for many, a student hostel for others, and an out-of-town hotel for a select few. The party assembled in the University of Podlasie library for a Welcome Reception that evening, with tables full of traditional Polish cooked meats and salads. In fact, most people were to be found in the adjacent lecture hall, watching the football World Cup final between Spain and the Netherlands, and the cacophony of vuvuzelas permeated the whole building!

The Opening Ceremony, including speeches by Professor Barbara Kudrycka, Minister for Science and Higher Education, Professor Antoni Jówko, Rector of the University of Podlasie, and Mr Wojciech Kudelski, Mayor of the City of Siedlce, began the proceedings on the Monday morning. Following this, it was my turn, and I was very grateful to have had the opportunity to present the Opening Lecture (on fossil spiders) early on, and so relax for the rest of the conference. The venue for the congress was Siedlce Sports Hall, and the plenary lectures and Systematics sessions were held in the gymnasium. Acoustics were distinctly weird there, and the hot weather (without air conditioning) meant that delegates struggled to find places to sit where they could both hear and be comfortable. Nevertheless, the organization by Marek and his team was formidable in spite of these difficulties.

Each morning we had two plenary sessions, which included mine on recent advances in spider palaeontology, Bill Eberhard on recent studies of tropical orb webs: effects of miniaturization and manipulation by parasitoid wasps, Gonzalo Giribet on Opiliones as models for evolutionary biogeographic studies, Friedrich Barth on spider sense organs, Mark Elgar on sit-and-wait predators: a misnomer for orb-weaving spiders, Gabriele Uhl on the secret lives of dwarf spiders, Sam Zschokke on gravity and spider webs, Wayne Maddison on phylogenetic radiation of salticid spiders, Robert Raven on a review of the Mygalomorphae, and Rudy Jocqué on distribution patterns of Afrotropical arachnids. Since Wednesday was excursion day, the observant reader will realise that the conference went on until lunchtime on Saturday to accommodate all these talks. Following the Plenary Lectures, the rest of each day was divided into three parallel sessions: one generally on systematics, one mainly on ecology, conservation and such, and the other covering everything else, such as other arachnid orders. I must admit to not trying to hop from one session to another but stuck with systematics, so missed what were, by all accounts, some excellent talks.



Figure 1. The Bug river valley, on the border of Belarus in eastern Poland. © Paul Selden.

One highlight within the systematics sessions, for me, was a series of talks which described research that finally sorted out the systematic placement of the Mimetidae. These spiders are familiar to British arachnologists as the so-called pirate spiders. *Ero* (British genus) and *Mimetus* are the most speciose and cosmopolitan genera of the family. Some years ago, Ray Forster and Norm Platnick re-delineated the superfamily Palpimanoidea and included within it all spiders with peg-teeth on the chelicerae. These teeth are unlike those of other spiders in that, rather than being simple extensions of the cuticle, are stout, modified setae. While most other families in this group sit well together (e.g. Palpimanidae, Archaeidae, Huttoniidae, Stenochilidae), there has always been a problem with the mimetids, which share many characteristics with araneoids, as pointed out by Karin Schütt some years ago. Now, new work by comparative morphologists, molecular systematists and cytogeneticists shows that Karin was quite right in removing the mimetids from this superfamily. Their development of peg-teeth is presumably convergent.

Two hundred and seventy three participants were listed in the programme, from 44 countries. Top of the list was the USA, with 35 participants, followed by Germany (29) and the host country (25). The UK came well down the list with only 5 participants, including 3 students from the University of Nottingham, and equalled by Iran, Japan, Switzerland and the Netherlands. Sizable contingents from India (14) and Brazil (12) indicate the



Figure 2. Arachnologists enjoying the sunshine after lunch at the restaurant in Stary Bubl. © P. Selden.





Figure 3. Arachnologists surrounding a likely tree in the Janów Podlaski Arabian stud. © Paul Selden.

greater global participation by these formerly developing nations. Indeed, UK participants were outnumbered by expat Brits from other countries, all of which must say something about the state of professional arachnology in Britain.

But conferences are really as much about meeting people with shared interests, enjoying the venue, and partying, than just lecture and poster sessions. Accompanying persons were treated to visits to Warsaw and the Kozłówka Palace, for example, and almost everyone went on the congress excursion on Wednesday to the Bug river valley in eastern Poland. This area takes one back to the old days of farming practices and simple rural life. Situated on the border with Belarus (we needed to have passports at the ready just in case), the Bug river meanders through flood plains occupied by flowery meadows and pastures. Simple farmhouses still get their water supply from wells, grow rye, and keep a few livestock. The lack of pesticides and mechanisation is epitomised by the regular song of the Yellowhammer, every little town has its White Stork's nest, there was abundant evidence of the presence of the European Beaver, and insects rare in Britain (I saw a Wood White, *Leptidea sinapis*) were abundant. Oh, and spiders too! *Argiope* was everywhere, but being a protected area, those who wanted to could not collect on parts of the trip. The excursion lunch was a splendid and quite traditional Polish meal of soup, boiled beef and vegetables, followed by home-made cakes and coffee in a glorious setting (Fig.



Figure 4. White Stork's nest. © Paul Selden.

2). After lunch, our group visited the famous Arabian stud of Janów Podlaski; established in 1817 and still rearing some of the most expensive show horses in the world.

Thursday evening was the dinner, held in the Janusz Hotel, followed by dancing, and on Friday night the impromptu Russian Party (though, like the Edinburgh Festival Fringe, it has now become a mainstream event). For those unfamiliar with the latter, Yuri Marusik from Magadan, Russia, provides smoked fish and fish-egg canapés, washed down with the most exotic vodkas one can imagine. There were a few sore heads and glazed expressions the following day. Sadly, though, we had to leave our friends and take the long, hot ride back to the airport. The good news, however, is that this event is to be repeated in three year's time, in Taiwan! Please consider saving up for what will be a wonderful arachnological event in another unforgettable setting. Meanwhile, I should like to thank Marek Żabka and all of his helpers (in particular Barbara Patoleta, Izabela Hajdamowicz, Joanna Gardzińska, Piotr Jastrzębski, Marzena Stańska, Maciej Bartos, Małgorzata Kozłowska and Łukasz Nicewicz) for organizing and running a splendid congress.

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