

The Spiders and Their Relatives of St. Vincent and the Grenadines

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The community of naturalists is always ready to welcome an effective guide to a locally abundant group of plants or animals. This very attractive new guide to the spiders of St. Vincent and the Grenadines (henceforth SVG) aims to fill a very definite need. The authors are a leading lesser-antillean naturalist, a Cuban spider specialist, and an academic biologist from Barbados. I should note that the book is classily dedicated to three outstanding local individuals, the recently deceased Conrad DeFreitas and Earle Kirby and the extant Jacques Daudin. It's good to see these luminaries get their props.

The book opens with an introduction to St. Vincent and to spider studies, followed by a chapter on the biology of spiders. These are the weakest parts, not so much for any errors as for missed opportunities. Despite a one-page "biogeographical sketch", there is no real attempt to put St. Vincent and the Lesser Antilles into their proper context. The full-page cladogram of major orders of arthropods is outdated and much too vague. The statement that 35% of the known spider species of SVG are known from nowhere else, if accurate, shows not that endemism is high in these islands -- it is certainly just a fraction of 35% -- but that other islands have been hardly explored in this regard.

The biology chapter will be of little use to beginners, as there is no attempt to say what is really important and interesting about spiders. In particular, there is no focus on the two key general facts about spiders: a) they are all predatory, and b) they all make varied and sophisticated use of silk. One could frame a very good introduction to the group around these two facts. On the other hand, I was pleased to see mention of spider-hunting wasps, with scientific names and information about two prominent species.

The core of the book, and its real strength, is the identification guide, occupying about half of the pages. These are arranged by families, as one would expect, in a standard taxonomic sequence. Three families of mygalomorphs and 28 families of araneomorphs are treated, comprising most of those that have ever been recorded from SVG. Identifying spiders is often not easy, but this guide does a good job of helping even the unaided beginner to learn at least the most commonly encountered families.

Beyond that, there is a wealth of high-quality, informative photographs by Mark DeSilva that permit one to identify many of the common species with confidence. Fifty-three named species (and some others that are not identified to species) are shown in colour, many of them

in several different shots. These multiple photos are used to good advantage to show different life stages and sexes, as well as the web in some cases. In some cases, these are even used to show colour variation within the species, as in the widespread *Gasteracantha cancriformis*.

This section is followed by a much briefer treatment of other arachnid orders. The authors have shown a good sense of proportion here, as naturalists interested in spiders will also want to know a thing or two about such creatures as scorpions, mites and daddy-longlegs, but it would not make sense to try to cover everything to the same degree. Again, the other arachnids are well illustrated.

The book ends with four appendices, the most valuable of which, number 3, is a checklist of the 181 known spider species of SVG.

The spider fauna of SVG is better known than that of any other part of the Lesser Antilles. "The Spiders and Their Relatives of St. Vincent and the Grenadines" is an excellent pioneering effort that can profitably be used by anyone interested in these intriguing creatures in a most interesting part of our region.

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