

Jo-Anne N. Sewlal (1979-2020), Araneologist and Environmentalist

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It was with widespread shock and dismay that the news was received of Jo-Anne Sewlal's untimely death from an acute allergic reaction in January of this year. She has passed from among us with a great deal yet undone, but not before showing what she could do.

Jo-Anne came sharply to the attention of one of us (CKS) as a student in the general entomology course at The University of the West Indies (UWI). Every year I devoted the final lecture to a more in-depth treatment of one selected group of insects or arachnids. One year it was butterflies, another year ants, and the year that Jo-Anne did the course the topic was spiders. I ended by noting that at that time I was the ranking expert on this group in the Eastern Caribbean, not because I was a real araneologist but just because there was nobody better. There was thus a wide-open niche for anyone wishing to devote her/his main attention to this large, diverse and ecologically impactful group. At the end of class Jo-Anne came forward to tell me unequivocally that that was what she wanted to do. At the time I assumed this was due to my eloquence and only later learned that she had had an affinity for spiders since childhood (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?reload=9&v=HtM7skvqhs4>). She just needed someone to show that there could be a career in it. She did both of her graduate degrees at UWI, completing her PhD in 2013 under the supervision of Professor Adrian Hailey.

As she began graduate studies the following semester, I estimated that in two years Jo-Anne would surpass my moderate knowledge of spiders to become the ranking expert. In fact, it didn't take nearly that long, and I soon routinely re-directed to her the occasional spider-related inquiries that came to me from academic colleagues and



students, as well as from the general public. The people soon learned to take their questions directly to her. She was a member of several scientific and environmental societies, including the hemispheric American Arachnological Society (AAS).

One of us (BC) vividly recalls her participation at the 2009 AAS annual meeting in Arkansas, USA. I took special delight during a meeting field trip in being able to show her all three of the eastern North American species of spiny orb-weavers (*Micrathena*). She was keenly interested in this genus and had already collected the nine members found in Trinidad.

As an ongoing project, Jo-Anne aimed to contribute to the (almost non-existent) knowledge of the diversity of spiders in Trinidad and Tobago. After publishing a list of known spider families in 2003, she occasionally discovered new ones, so that the list was gradually augmented over the years. In recording diversity at the species level, her special focus was the orb-weaving spiders.

The West Indies are an entrancing place for a biologist,



Micrathena gracilis female, widespread in woodland and comparable habitat in eastern North America.

and Jo-Anne took delight in field work not only in Trinidad & Tobago but throughout the Lesser Antilles (Anguilla, Antigua, Grenada, Montserrat, Nevis, St Eustatius, St Kitts, St Lucia) and on Great Inagua in the Bahamas. In our various collaborations on many of these islands, Jo-Anne took the lead in studies of spiders, while I (CKS) led when the topic was social insects.



Atop a rock wall during a collecting trip to St. Eustatius. The wall was compiled with slave labour during the colonial period.

Jo-Anne's major activities went beyond research. Most notably, she was a prolific contributor to the local popular literature on biological and especially ecological topics. At different times she edited the bulletins of the Trinidad and Tobago Field Naturalists' Club and Environment Tobago, and she had a regular column in the weekly *Tobago News*. At the time of her death she served as secretary of the Trinidad & Tobago Branch of the Caribbean Academy of Sciences.

In addition, she had a large appetite for other intellectual and cultural pursuits. The newspaper reports about her emphasised her role in organising a chess club

for elementary-age students, and she practised various forms of dance.

At the time of writing, the two of us are charged with completing her remaining research papers for publication.

Selected publications

Sewlal, J.N. and **Cutler, B.** 2003. Annotated list of spider families (Araneida) of Trinidad and Tobago. *Living World, Journal of the Trinidad and Tobago Field Naturalists' Club*, 2003:9-13

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