

## On The Web With Spiders: A Handbook With Field Notes

by Abhijeeth Bayani, IISc Press 2022.

# Foreword

The Harvard biologist Edward O. Wilson famously said: "Most children have a bug period. I never grew out of mine". Coining the term *Biophilia* (in a book by that name; Harvard University Press, 1984) to describe our "innate tendency to focus on life and lifelike processes", Wilson has argued that we have a natural empathy for all forms of life, honed by natural selection. But then why don't all human beings grow up into naturalists? I think that our culture is partly to blame, as it expects us to grow out of our innate "childish" tendencies and become "respectable" adults and pursue "respectable professions". It would be a fine research project to investigate why some people successfully defy society's expectations and manage to spend their entire lives pursuing their first love, be it for insects, birds, snakes or spiders. The author of this book, Abhijeet Bayani, would make a worthy guinea pig for such a study.

Abhijeet has been obsessed with spiders from a young age, observing, collecting, experimenting and documenting their diversity and behaviour, all for his personal pleasure. Such a pursuit stands in stark contrast to 'professional duties' that most people have to perform out of necessity. The opportunity to pursue one's biophilia-driven hobby in place of, or in addition to, some other profession will be a win-win situation, creating happy people as well as sound knowledge about life around us. The sound knowledge about spiders that Abhijeet Bayani has thus created is now in your hands.

*On the Web With Spiders* is, as the subtitle claims, a handbook with field notes, on spiders found in Central and South India. Beginning with much useful information on how to and how not to study and photograph spiders, Abhijeet devotes a whole chapter to debunking 18 common myths about spiders. There is surely something about spiders that fires the human imagination, often in a negative way. After all, the fear of spiders has been honoured with a

legitimate word in the dictionary, arachnophobia. Among the possible reasons for the prevalence of *arachnophobia*, Abhijeet includes "some inexplicable evolutionary cause of such fear". As an evolutionary biologist, I would, of course, like to see this inexplicable cause made explicable. This is a naughty little problem, and if anyone is inclined to take a shot at understanding the causes of arachnophobia, E.O Wilson has shown the way with his scholarly analysis of ophidiophobia, the similar irrational fear of snakes. And like Wilson, you will have the pleasure of surveying the vast knowledge of the disciplines of arachnology, biology, culture, history, psychology, religion, sociology, and more. Having debunked myths about spiders, Abhijeet provides brief basic information about the biology, morphology, behaviour, diversity, distribution, taxonomy and phylogeny of spiders, sufficient information to guide the reader through the rest of the journey. And that journey will take the reader through a detailed description and Abhijeet's own personal knowledge of each of 24 families of spiders.

Another reason most of us grow out of our bug period, or, more generally speaking, our biophilia period, is the absence of easily accessible scientific knowledge of our local fauna and flora. It is ironic that this problem is much more acute in biodiversity-rich parts of the world. And it is doubly ironic because the production of basic natural history information is less expensive compared to the production of scientific knowledge in almost any other branch of modern science. But the problem can be mitigated by those few who become experts in their local natural history despite all these hurdles. The present volume by Abhijeet Bayani is an excellent illustration of such an effort.

The biggest hurdle to cultivating one's interest in natural history is the inability to name the common plants and animals. It is not surprising that indigenous peoples all over the world have invented names for all their local fauna and flora, sometimes even more complete and accurate than modern scientific nomenclature. Unfortunately, most students of science today neither have the knowledge of local names nor of their scientific counterparts. As the bumble bee specialist Dave Goulson has recently argued in his book *Silent Earth* (Harper, 2021), "If you cannot recognise a brimstone butterfly, you will probably not notice one when it flies by. It does not exist for you because it has no name, and you will not notice or care if it ceases to exist entirely". In *The Lost Words* (Penguin, UK, 2017), Robert Macfarlane and Jackie Morris poignantly remind us that "Once upon a time, words began to vanish from the language of children. They disappeared so quietly that at first, almost no one noticed - fading away like water on stone. The words were those that children used to name the natural world around them: acorn, adder, bluebell, bramble, conker

– gone! Fern, heather, kingfisher, otter, raven, willow, wren ... all of them gone! The words were becoming lost: no longer vivid in children's voices, no longer alive in their stories."

It is therefore gratifying to see that field guides, not only to our trees and birds, but also to our butterflies, ants, frogs, snakes, mammals and more, are being written by our own experts. Abhijeet Bayani's guide to spiders is the latest addition to this growing list. The love of natural history reinforced by a sound knowledge of the local fauna and flora will not only help satisfy our primal instinct of biophilia but will also lay the foundation for better scientific research in biology and beyond. I congratulate Abhijeet Bayani and the IISc Press for giving us this wonderful gift.

**Raghavendra Gadagkar**  
Centre for Ecological Sciences, IISc, Bangalore