

**Spiders of Australia: an introduction
to their classification, biology and distribution**

by Trevor J Hawkeswood

with photographs by B Coulson, T J Hawkeswood, CJ Parker and M Peterson;
paintings by JR Turner

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paperback. ISBN 9546421928. RRP \$44*

Having long held a fascination with Australasian arthropods, particularly insects and spiders, I keenly accepted a review copy of *Spiders of Australia* from the author. A flip through the glossy photographs, depicting many live spiders in natural settings, rekindled memories of encounters during my childhood and youth. There were few introductory spider books in my primary school library when my interest in arthropods developed in the early 1970s, and had a suitable piece such as this been then available I would have read it with enthusiasm.

The work is introductory, rather than definitive. It is educative, compiled by a well-known naturalist and indefatigable writer on Australasian natural history, and seems appropriately directed towards a lay readership or the intelligent beginner observer. About 150 spider species of a national total exceeding 1800 are described and many are beautifully illustrated. The illustrations feature the live spiders in natural settings, providing a glimpse into their ability to camouflage. To enable the book to be practical as an identification guide, the 166 colour plates, comprising 139 photographs and 27 paintings, are cross-referenced to the relevant species accounts. Many common Australian spiders will be quickly recognised using the sharp colour plates, but the author points out their identification limitations, given that important characters defining species or distinguishing sibling taxa may not be visible in the photographs. The book is about half A4 sized and glossy covered, and as well as conveniently sized, its slim shape enables snug fitting into one's daypack or car glove box for quick retrieval in the field.

The preface describes the author's childhood fascination with flora and fauna, stimulating further reading. The introduction includes general information on morphology, with line drawings of dorsal and ventral surfaces of a typical spider, with external anatomical structures labelled to assist the novice. Spider diets, lifecycles, courtship and mating behaviour are described, and favoured habitats specified. The classification section covers the basics any new inquirer will need to know. Many readers will quickly turn to the short section listing the 14 genera of poisonous Australian spiders (10 of which are illustrated in the work) so as to familiarise themselves with any undesirable home visitors. Here the work wisely promotes collection of the actual biting spider for positive identification to prevent myths from mis-associations – a problem the medical profession now knows only too well since the White-tail Spider's circumstantially earned reputation became legendary during the 1980s.

The 29 spider families and representative species discussed are all listed for quick reference (pp 29–33). Family overviews (specifying species numbers at national and world levels) and selected species accounts, which comprise the bulk of the book, then follow (pp 33–163). Headed by scientific names (unlike birds and butterflies, most spiders don't have common names), one or more common representatives of each family are presented, accompanied by black and white thumb-sized photos. These are cross-referenced (by plate numbers) to the enlarged colour plates located at the rear of the book (pp 200–257, albeit those particular pages are not individually numbered). For each representative species, both sexes are usually described and adult size is given

in millimetres (as the illustrations are without scale). Species' accounts often include commentary on egg sizes and quantity, egg sac structures and placements, hatching time, adult and spiderling behaviour, and common prey where known, or known to the author. Importantly, many observations by the author appear otherwise unpublished.

A five-page glossary assists readers unfamiliar with technical terms, but usually the author keeps jargon to a minimum in the body text, enhancing its appeal to a lay field-naturalist audience. A list of 11 Australian spider books introduces the Reference section (comprising bibliographic rather than cited sources), and includes brief annotations on earlier generalist works spanning from 1935 to 1996, including comment on their availability should readers wish to supplement their personal library. For advanced reading, many journal papers are listed on a family by family basis. Artistic credits are given on (unnumbered) p 257; most photographs having been taken by the author. The guide then concludes with arthropod and plant indexes of both common and scientific names.

Although perhaps of limited concern to the novice or hobbyist observer, the guide does contain a sprinkling of inaccuracies which spider specialists will detect, as well as a few other limitations. *Lampona* is listed as a member of the Gnaphosidae on p 27, but in the main text is under Lamponidae (p 67). Distribution data are defined to State level only, and some appears a little conservative. For example, the St Andrews Cross spider (*Argiope*, presumably *A. keyserlingi*, the common species illustrated) occurs in Melbourne, but Victoria is not listed (p 116). I found the black and white inset photo placement above (rather than below) each species' name a little ambiguous for groups where several species are present in sequence. And, given my biogeographical faunal interests, small range-fill maps for each species seem conspicuous by their absence.

Readability suffers in places due to the variable print quality. In my review copy the text font within the species accounts on pp 34-35, 39, 42-43, 46-47 are unfortunately finely shadowed or double imaged. In addition, a small number of grammatical or typographical errors, or word omissions are

present (pp 61, 67, 73, 94, 96, 123, 157). A preposition is missing on p 112 (fourth line), a verb is omitted on p 147, insects is rendered 'inspects' (p 150), and Myanmar has been misspelled twice (p 46). The adjective 'tropical' (p 162) in reference to rainforests in south eastern Queensland is latitudinally inappropriate. Structurally, a paragraph on red-back spiders (pp 141-143) is lengthy and might have been better topically split. Selected species have been described as 'interesting' (e.g. p 99), and no doubt these are to the author, but perhaps further explanation is needed to convince readers or spider enthusiasts as to why. The author frequently mentions the lack of information available for various species, and a generic statement to this effect might have been well placed in the introduction to avoid repetition across sections.

Because of my pragmatic interests, I would have liked to see in-text citation of books and papers in support of some specifics and to enable rapid sourcing and checking of important facts for quality assurance purposes – in line with the growing trend towards evidence-based literature in recent decades. However, in a guidebook written for general public readership or middle secondary to primary school student usefulness, textual reinforcement can be distracting, often reducing comprehension. Moreover, body text heavily reinforced with citations could easily bore younger inquirers who will gain most from reading this book. For this reason I imagine the author has opted for the classical educative approach over fact fortification.

Curiously, the book does not provide information on alcohol preservation or live keeping of adults. Spider collection allows many observation opportunities for budding arachnologists and this seems to be an oversight. Although some Australian spiders are very dangerous, most are not, as the book indicates. During my early childhood I kept Leaf-curling Spiders in honey-jars and in my 'Bug-catcher'® (a popular 1970s child's toy for arthropod observation), to watch their web-spinning behaviour and habits. Yet, perhaps in this age of conservation the author did not want to focus on traditional natural history practices. Nonetheless, these remain important since we know so little about the behaviour

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of our less common species and particularly given that so many Australian species still remain to be described.

Dr Hawkeswood's book aids rapid identification of common spiders likely to be encountered in bushland or home gardens in southern Australian cities. It is a welcome addition to the casual naturalist's library, and well suited to laypersons wishing to get to know the local species and learn of their habits as a recreational pursuit. As a registered teacher of biology, I can recommend it as a useful resource for school and public libraries in that it provides general information in a readily accessible form, being particularly useful for school projects. For school children, the glossy presentation, large plates, easy-to-read style and clear structural diagrams of spider external anatomy will be a major attraction and provide foundational knowl-

edge prior to inquisitive hunting, garden observation and cautious collection. Having also worked professionally in both entomology and arachnology, I remain hopeful that young readers may be stimulated to learn more about the ecology of the Australian spider fauna. Nature books read during my childhood fuelled my own biogeographical interests, so I'm sure Dr Hawkeswood's handy book will similarly pique the curiosity of many young readers whose developing interests gravitate towards spiders or other arthropods such as insects. And, through such interest some may progress to professional roles in biological or species diversity research.

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