

BOOK REVIEWS

BARNARD, P. C. (ed.) 1999. Identifying British Insects and Arachnids: An Annotated Bibliography of Key Works. Cambridge Univ. Press; New York, xii + 353 p. ISBN 0-521-63241-2. Hardback. 15 × 23 cm. \$80.00.

Suppose that you encounter some specimens of an insect or arachnid for which you want a species name. Suppose that because of your entomological training you can identify them to level of order and, with or without some uncertainty, to family. Then what? Do you give up at this point and look for a systematist? If you are lucky you may find a systematist specializing in that family; if you are very lucky, the systematist may even be willing to identify your specimens; and if you are extremely lucky, the systematist may be willing to do this soon, and at no charge.

Don't count on your luck. Maybe you cannot find a systematist specializing in the taxon of interest to you. Why should a systematist be willing to help you? Shouldn't you be able to identify the specimens yourself if you are an entomologist? Why can't you identify the specimens? Surely you used keys at some stage in your past? If you had good enough identification keys, you should be able to. Where can you find keys to help confirm the family-level identification, and then to identify to species level? Maybe you don't know where to start looking for such keys. Wouldn't it be nice if there were a handy reference book on your bookshelf to provide that information?

There is now such a book—for the British insects and arachnids. It is a multi-authored book, with specialist systematists collaborating to provide the most useful information. There's a general introduction to each order and, for the most speciose orders, to each suborder and superfamily, and even family. Then follows an annotated list of references, each having keys to part (even if only a small part) of the taxon in question, to species level. The references span many decades—you would not find the older ones in a computerized search. There's an index down to the level of family. Preceding the systematic treatment is a chapter called "Sources of Information" which, of course, includes Internet sources. The introduction states: "In a book of this size, which contains well over 2000 references, there are bound to be some errors and omissions . . ." Yet, I found no typographical errors nor any obvious errors of fact or omission, which I think is an unusual event in any entomological book.

This is the first such book—on the fauna of a land area so large and with such a large fauna (some 23,500 species)—that I have encountered. It sets a good example for what could become a series of books, with one for each state in the USA. Anyone contemplating such a production should buy a copy of this one.

This book is, of course, an intermediate step. What ultimately we want is all this information free on the Internet. Not only do we want it on the Internet, but we want links to the contents of each reference (the keys themselves, reconstructed if necessary, and illustrated) to all insects and arachnids, also on the Internet. This is a task for systematists—which is all the more reason they should not waste their time identifying specimens for you—and why you should use existing keys to make your own identifications—and why, at least if you live in Britain, you need a copy of this book, now.

What should systematists do once they have completed the necessary keys and presented them on the Internet? Keys for some parts of the British fauna still have not been written, and studies of the fauna of America north of Mexico are less complete. When those tasks are done, there is an immense tropical fauna to deal with. After that, maybe systematists will have time to identify sundry specimens that the rest

of the community of biologists does not feel competent to identify for itself, keys notwithstanding.

J. H. Frank
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