

Central European Spiders—Internet Identification Guide: Project Outline

The identification guide *Spinnen Mitteleuropas* by Stefan Heimer & Wolfgang Nentwig was published in 1991. For the first time since Simon, Lessert, Bösenberg or Roewer, the identification keys and drawings of almost all central European spiders were brought together. However, in the last decade, our knowledge of spider taxonomy and faunistics in central Europe (and world wide) has steadily increased; consequently, this almost 10-year-old identification book clearly requires updating with improvements and extensions.

On the initiative of one of the co-authors, Wolfgang Nentwig, we set out to discuss a revised edition of the book. But it quickly became clear that it would make little sense to produce a new edition in traditional book format. What is needed is a dynamic version which can be constantly updated. We propose production of a database, with identification keys and drawings, in book form on the Internet, always accessible and printable.

In summer 1998, we decided to organise, as editors, the project of an identification key on the Internet based on the version published by Heimer & Nentwig (1991). A principal idea was to take advantage of a networked text in an open, dynamic system as provided by the world wide web. Using the text and figures from the existing book is clearly only the first step. The identification guide should be constantly expandable: not only by adding new species and recognising nomenclatural changes, but also by incorporating new ecological information. Later, an expansion of the geographical area covered is expected. For such an ambitious project to succeed, we need the support and cooperation of many arachnologists. For this reason, we would define our roles as acting as organisers and editors rather than as authors. The contents themselves should be provided by others, even more so than in the 1991 book.

Because the identification book of 1991 necessarily serves as a basic starting point, the first step was to get permission from its authors and publishers to reproduce their text and pictures. Fortunately, no major problems arose here, so that transfer of the basic information from the book into electronic form could begin, incorporating notified corrections. In addition, permission was obtained for the use of Michael Roberts's work. For further figures from newer taxonomic works, it is hoped that the authors themselves will directly integrate their information. At first, figures will only be in the form of line drawings, because of problems with data size, download speed of colour pictures, and resolution.

Many errors and obscurities in the keys are already known: their correction and clarification will be given priority consideration. Where new species have become known in the interim, the keys will be adjusted as necessary. If possible, more recent revisions should be integrated personally by the respective examiners. The dichotomous key (and therefore the construction of such keys as text data) will remain as the basic tool for identification in preference to a computer-aided key.

Additions to current knowledge of the distribution of the taxa (in Europe) will be integrated directly. An expansion in the scope of the ecological statements directly in the database or as cross-references to corresponding literature (e.g. Hänggi *et al.*, 1995) is also anticipated.

This identification guide on the Internet should simply be regarded as a service providing an entry point to spider determination for everyone. It cannot, however, replace the specific taxonomic technical literature. We therefore attach great value to the insertion of cross-references to the specialist literature for particularly

difficult groups. For taxa requiring revision, notes to corresponding references will be integrated, to avoid giving an impression of unwarranted confidence in the identification work. Although a major goal is to remain as dynamic as possible and to incorporate innovations at any time, the identification guide can, nevertheless, never be the place where new descriptions, synonyms or taxonomic revisions can be published. The nomenclature used will strictly follow Platnick's 'Catalogues', whereby references to newer changes or traditionally well-known names are always possible as additional notes.

The geographical area covered will, for the time being, be maintained as that defined in the book, but should be extended in future if at all possible. For example, many taxa from the southern slope of the Alps are missing.

Development of this project in various further directions is envisaged. Translation of the keys into English is a priority. Variability of structures may be shown by means of links to further figures. Cross-references to continuing taxonomic works could be installed, connections to nomenclatural works (e.g. Platnick, 1998) are conceivable and a linking of literature databases is a possibility. Faunistic references (check lists, catalogues, etc.) could be increasingly installed and ecological data made available by special links. The scope is essentially limited only by the availability of manpower.

We are sure that this project, with its dynamic structure and its philosophy of continual expansion and improvement, will succeed only if the respective experts input their specific knowledge. As editors, we can offer data based on Heimer & Nentwig (1991) and can co-ordinate efficient further development. The whole project should be seen as an offer of service. As members of institutions such as universities and museums we can guarantee continuity and consistency in organisation—the contents, however, must be produced by the relevant specialists.

To try to avoid starting with an obsolete knowledge base, we invite all arachnologists to submit notes and remarks about Heimer & Nentwig (1991) as soon as possible. Likewise, we would be very grateful if data from the latest revisions (either already published or in press) could be integrated by the authors themselves. Offers to revise particular groups, putting the authors' data and figures at our disposal, will be particularly welcome; such contributions will be guaranteed full acknowledgement.

Sample pages are not yet accessible. Their availability and address will be announced on the home page of the Synecology Section of the Zoological Institute of the University of Bern (<http://www.cx.unibe.ch/zos/syn.htm>), probably near the end of 1999. At the moment, we are urgently trying to find someone who might be willing to translate the keys into English.

References

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