Neospintharus syriacus – a Widespread Species in the Eastern Mediterranean?

by Barbara Knoflach-Thaler[1], Johan van Keer[2], Martin Askins[3] & Tony Russell-Smith[4]

The theridiid *Argyrodes syriaca* was originally described from Lebanon by Octavius Pickard-Cambridge (Pickard-Cambridge, 1872) where he captured specimens from webs of *Cyrtophora* (family Araneidae). More recently, it was redescribed with excellent figures by Levy (1985) who illustrates the extraordinary variation in the form of the opisthosoma in both sexes. He describes it as widespread in Israel where it is sometimes found in webs of Linyphiidae, Pholcidae and Uloboridae, often in damp places. This species was transferred to the genus *Neospintharus* by Agnarsson (2004) on the basis of details of the male palp, including the entire conductor and the unridged embolus. Moreover, the clypeal projection of the male is elongate, both cephalic projections bear strong, modified setae and the anterior median eyes are situated in the clypeal groove. *N. syriacus* is the only species of this genus recorded from Europe, all of the remaining 11 species in the genus being from the Americas and the Far East.

Over the past ten years, we have collected *N. syriacus* at several localities in Greece and Cyprus. Our records are as follows:

Neospintharus syriacus female from Sitia, near Lastros, Eastern Crete, Sept. 1998, in typical resting posture. The abdominal humps and legs tucked close to the body enhance its cryptic appearance. © Barbara Knoflach-Thaler.

Greece:
Eastern Crete, route to Sitia, near Lastros, 1 female, 29.9.1998, beating shrubs, B. Knoflach & K. Thaler leg.

Rhodos:
North of Apolakkia, Virgin Zoodochos Pigi, 3 females, 12.5.2006, beating *Cytisus* on slope, J. Van Keer leg. (2628).
North Lakki, 1 female, 12.5.2006, hand collected on branches in *Pinus* forest, J. & K. Van Keer leg. (2629).
South Petaloudes, 1 male, 15.5.2006, stonefield with maquis, J. & K. Van Keer leg. (2641).
South of Soroni, 4 females, 18.5.2006, beating branches of *Pinus*, K. Van Keer leg. (2648).

Cyprus:
Thylliria: Makounta: Argaka-dam, 1 male, 27.4.2007, beating branches of low vegetation and heather, J. Van Keer leg. (2680).
Near river S.E. of Alassa, 1 male, 4.5.2007, swept from lush grass, A. Russell-Smith leg.
Near Aghios Minos church, Akamas Peninsula, 2.5.2007, 2 males, 1 female, 1 immature, in orb-web and on pines in wood. M. Askins leg.

A. syriacus probably shows a trend to araneophagy, as it is not regularly observed in other spider webs. Clearly, the species is more widespread than previously thought and it may well be found in other areas of southern Greece and the Mediterranean part of Turkey in the future.

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Conservation of Arachnids in Ancient Trees

by Lawrence Bee

Unlike many invertebrates, arachnids (spiders and pseudoscorpions) are generally not particular as to the actual species of ancient tree with which they may be associated. Rather, it is the number of different structural niches available within a single ancient tree which offer arachnids a wide variety of habitat conditions.

In addition, although there are a number of arachnids which seem to be associated only with ancient trees, there are many other arachnids which appreciate the habitat niches available in trees which are perhaps less mature but show premature aging characteristics, e.g. holes caused by hollowing or associated decay, fungi, wounds, large dead branches and loose bark.

Specific characteristics of ancient trees therefore offer particular conditions for a wide range of arachnids also recorded from other habitats, for example:

- Species such as *Nuctenea umbratica* and *Amaurobius fenestralis*, often associated with deeply fissured loose bark on ancient trees, are also regularly recorded from a variety of other habitats. Webs of *A. fenestralis*, particularly, may well attract the cobweb beetle *Ctesias serra*, the larvae of which feed on remains of insects left in the web by the spider.

- Dead wood, lying on the ground, provides a habitat for *Segestria senoculata* to spin its tubular web in empty larval tunnels.

- Old birds' nests and squirrels' dreys, areas of epicormic growth where dry litter and detritus can build up provide suitable habitats for *Harpactea hombergi* and some linyphiid species notably *Lepthyphantes leprosus.*

- The foliage of ancient trees provides habitat for some philodromid species and orb-web spinners such as *Araniella cucurbitina* and *Araneus triguttatus* (on broadleaves) and *Araneus sturmi* (on evergreens).

- Hollow trunks offer suitable damp, shady conditions for species such as *Metellina merianae* and *Meta menardi*.

All the above species are recorded from other habitat types but it is the variety of specific niches present within and around ancient trees that makes them particularly valuable habitats for arachnids.

Certain rare and notable arachnid species in the UK appear from the known records to be associated specifically with ancient trees.

- The jumping spider *Salticus zebraneus* is nationally scarce (Notable A), being recorded only from mature trees in open woodland or on the margins of woodland

Figure 1. Ancient oak, Cornbury. © Lawrence Bee.

clearings. The spider does not appear to be particular about the species of ancient tree – it is the presence of deeply fissured bark on old tree trunks which is the critical attraction for this species. Old trees of various species in parkland, on the margins of ancient woodland, in ancient hedgerows and even in a suburban garden have all yielded records for *S. zebraneus.* Apart from the recognised risk to ancient woodland and individual old trees from lack of management, there is an additional potential danger to this species where the tree is close to arable farmland. Here there is a distinct danger of spray drift from pesticide use affecting its continued existence.

- *Zygiella stroemi* is nationally scarce (Notable B) and is confined to old pine and oak trees. The spider spins its distinctive web on the bark of these trees, its retreat situated in a deep fissure or crack within the bark. Intensive forestry operations often surround such trees or necessitate their removal. Even where mature trees do remain – surrounded by developing forestry plantation – the formation of the deep fissures in the bark is less likely to occur.

- *Midia midas* is an extremely rare linyphiid spider designated as Nationally Vulnerable (RDB2). It appears to be confined to ancient trees in some of the larger relics of royal parks e.g. Sherwood, Windsor, Hainault and Epping Forests as well as Donington Park. Its specific microhabitats within ancient trees include squirrel dreys, bird nests and leaf litter accumulations in hollow trunks. In Sherwood, one individual male was recorded in 1980 after extensive survey work involving the placing (and subsequent examination after some months) of around 200 artificial bird nests in the hollow trunks and branches of some of the oldest oaks in the forest. Evidence from work in Epping Forest suggests the spider favours bird nests