

A Visit to Sai Baba Central School, Ongole

29 January 2007



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Introduction

I write books about nature. Since I live in New Zealand, I don't know much about nature in India. So I went to this school in Andhra Pradesh and asked the children there to help me find out what kind of creatures shared their playground. This is a booklet showing some of the things we found.



Crab Spider or Flower Spider (*Sidymella* species) [Family: Thomisidae].

The sharp-eyed children of Ongole quickly found one of these cream-coloured spiders hiding in a flower. This is where this kind of spider lives, which is why they are called flower spiders. As you can see in the picture, they hold their long front legs out to the side – which is of course why they are also known as crab spiders. Hidden inside the flower, they never build a web; they don't need to. The flower attracts insects for them and these spiders just need to sit still and wait for their dinner to come to them! They are often the same colour as the flower they sit in. The picture illustrates a little trick I did with the spider, letting it fall gently onto its back to show how it can somersault (roll over) backwards to get the right way up again. This is why this one is square at the back end and is known as a **Square-Ended Crab Spider**.



Orbweb Spider *Argiope* species [Family: Araneidae]

All spiders in this family weave sticky wheel-like webs to catch flying insects as food. This kind, *Argiope*, all have a special white zigzag band in the web. Many (like the one we saw in the school grounds) are black and yellow. Orb webs are masterpieces of engineering. In 1973, one curious schoolchild asked the NASA space agency whether they would take a pair of these spiders into space. This is how we now know that these spiders are able to learn entirely new ways to make their webs without using either wind or gravity. All spiders can rebuild their webs but it is a lot of work for them and they must first find a good place to build it. Some will even eat their own webs in the morning – a kind of natural recycling – and rebuild their web again at night. Still, I think it is kinder not to destroy their webs. It would be like damaging the fishing nets of the fishermen down along the coast. If the fishermen can't catch any fish, they and their families will go hungry. It is the same for a spider.



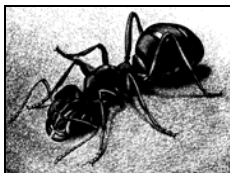
Jumping Spiders [Family: Salticidae]

We also found four different kinds of jumping spiders in the playground, most of them living on the sun-warmed walls. As the common name suggests, these spiders all have one thing in common: they jump! They also have remarkably good eyesight. They need to because they build no web to catch their food and must hunt if they want to eat. Two of their eight eyes stand out like car headlights and work like telescopes. The other six detect movement.



Daddy Longlegs Spider (*Pholcus phalangioides*)

We saw other spiders like these hiding inside the buildings. I gently poked my finger into one of their tangled webs to show how the spider vibrates to try and scare big creatures like me away. As their common name says, these spiders have very long legs. Inside your home, their webs often gather dust. It is not so unkind to take away dusty webs because these don't work well anymore. By building a fresh web, the spider may be able to catch more flies.



Ant

We saw a very big ant on the ground too, bigger than anything I ever saw in New Zealand. These can nip your toe! This picture is actually a very detailed drawing made from lots of black dots and shows what you can do if you don't have a camera! It is just lots of ink dots!



As I talked, nature continued to flutter by, with butterflies and birds landing in the **Neem Tree**.



Migrating Butterflies

Landing in this **Neem Tree** was a **Lesser Wanderer** (*Danaus chrysippus*) – left. Butterflies in this family often migrate long distances (which is why they are called wanderers). In India, this kind flies in swarms of thousands from the Nilgiri Hills to Kerala, for example. Among the plants in the school grounds we also saw the **Lemon Migrant Butterfly** (*Catopsilia pomona*) – right. In India, this one flies in spectacular swarms too over huge distances.



Common Indian Crow Butterfly (*Euploea core*)

This is another butterfly which landed in the **Neem Tree** while I was talking. With the help of a book from the school library, I worked out which one it was. The common name in the book was different from the name I am using here, which shows that people use different common names in different places. This is why the international scientific names can be very useful.



Grasshoppers

A girl with good eyes and a curious mind found a grasshopper – like the one on the left – hidden among the garden plants. The very pretty grasshopper on the right, the **Ak Grasshopper** (*Poecilotherus pictus*), is one we didn't find, but it is one of my favourites from Tiruvannamalai. I notice it is always on a Calotrope plant. Why? Because it likes the taste of the leaves of this plant so much that it will eat nothing else. Perhaps it is in Ongole too.



Squirrel

These squirrels call like a bird and can run very fast. In my country, we don't have squirrels.



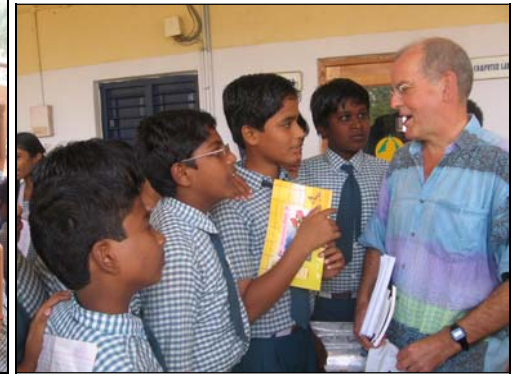
Common Swallow (*Hirundo rustica*)

Swallows breeding in the Himalayas leave there in huge flocks in winter to cross the length of India to Sri Lanka. This is why we kept seeing so many of these birds flying over the school in late January.



Crow (*Corvus* species)

At one point, a crow came to listen to my talk too, so I joked with the children about how this cheeky bird has the same name as my family name.



'Hands up who learnt something today!' says the school principal, Elise Saddler.

After my visit to the school, what better present than a poem from one of the children?

*Andrew the great author is the son of nature,
All the living organisms are his friends,
He cries when he loses a friend,
And he is the inspiration of nature.*

a poem from Jyothi Sai of VI Class

It makes me smile to think that next day was a holiday and that the insects and spiders would be left in peace. Thanks to them, and the teachers and children of Sai Baba Central School, I now know more about the wildlife of India.