

BOOK REVIEW

Harvestmen, the Biology of Opiliones

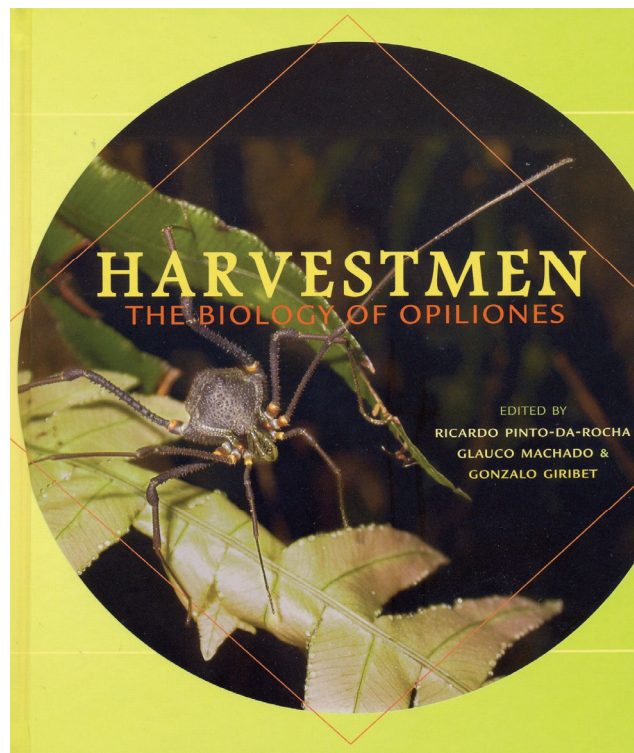
Ricardo Pinto-da-Rocha, Glauco Machado and Gonzalo Giribet (Eds.)(2007)
Published by Harvard University Press, ISBN 9780674023437, 597pp. RRP A\$173 (hardcover)

The harvestmen, those long-legged non-spiders, constitute the oldest order of arachnids, Opiliones, the fossilised forms from the Devonian (400mya) being remarkably similar to today's. They are the third largest order (after mites and spiders) but rather poorly known, even by biologists, to say nothing of the general public. This book, however, draws together the world-wide knowledge of Opiliones, with 25 contributors in 15 chapters. The contributors are mainly South American, some European, North American and one Australian - Christopher Taylor from WA Museum. This reflects not so much where Opiliones are found as where research priorities lie. Harvestmen are found on every continent except Antarctica in undisturbed environments, usually in sheltered, moist situations, as they do not cope well with exposure to dehydration. As pointed out above, this book does not concentrate on local faunas, but is a synthesis of the global picture. While this is an admirable coverage for Opiliones specialists, it is too wide for many students of the Arthropoda. To find which families occur in Australia, one has to investigate the whole text, as "Australia" is not even listed in the index.

The chapter on Palaeontology I found most absorbing. Remarkable detail is discernible in many Opiliones imprints in rocks, and the Tertiary and Cenozoic specimens in amber are splendid. Presence of Opiliones is an indicator of past moist, sheltered environments.

People who watched the television series '*Life in the Undergrowth*' will have been fascinated by David Attenborough's story of the harvestman guarding his mud nest containing eggs deposited by visiting females with whom he had mated. An occasional rogue female dug up and ate an egg. The behaviour of this species is also described in the book. Most Opiliones are omnivores, some scavengers and some carnivores.

Early in the book is a list of 50 local names for Opiliones, and their rendition into English, often reflecting their seasonal appearance, as at harvest. Australians are said to use a common name "daddy long legs" in addition to "harvestman", but all entomologists and related people I have known have been at pains to confine "daddy long legs" to a true spider. Moreover, not all Opiliones are long-legged!



Most species identified as endangered are cave-dwellers. No doubt Opiliones form an important component of the fauna in rainforests and similar places worthy of conservation, and should thus be identified and more thoroughly studied for their own sake, before they are lost. In addition, the editors of this book put forward the usefulness of Opiliones as amenable laboratory animals and models for studies in ecology, behaviour and evolution. The advent of this book may expand the number of Opiliones researchers - a worthy aim.

Well-illustrated keys are provided to the four sub-orders and all 45 families. Illustrations are all black and white. A subject index and a taxonomic index are appended, as well as an extensive reference list. I recommend ***Harvestmen, the Biology of Opiliones*** to any entomologist or arachnologist interested in broadening his/her understanding of this interesting group, as well as to any professional opilionist.

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