



XXXIX.—On doubts respecting the Existence of Bird-catching Spiders

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XXXIX.—*On doubts respecting the Existence of Bird-catching Spiders.* By W. S. MACLEAY, Esq., F.L.S., &c.

To Richard Taylor, Esq.

DEAR SIR,

SOME time in the beginning of 1840 I observed here, in the grounds of Elizabeth Bay, a young bird suspended in the geometrical web of an enormous spider which belongs to the same section as the European *Epeira diadema*. Although very common in the neighbourhood of Sidney, it remains as yet an undescribed species. The bird was the *Zosterops dorsalis* (of Vigers and Horsfield), which is so destructive to fruit in the gardens of this colony, and from the state of its feathers was evidently just flown from the nest. It was, when observed, already half-eaten, and the spider was in the act of sucking its juices. It appeared to have been dead two or three days. On recounting the circumstances to my father, he told me that he had already been witness of a similar fact. Having occasion about that time to write to Mr. Shuckard on another subject, I mentioned the fact to him, being anxious, from the love of truth, to retract a remark which I had made in a paper of mine printed in the Transactions of the Zoological Society some years before, namely, that "I disbelieved the existence of any bird-catching spider."

I have long desisted from noticing mis-statements of what I have published; because I now always hope that a reference to my publication will enable unprejudiced persons to arrive at the truth of my meaning. It is very different however with respect to my private letters; and I find, on a perusal of Mr. Swainson's late volume on Entomology in Lardner's Cyclopædia, that Mr. Shuckard, in referring to the above-mentioned private letter, has so singularly misunderstood my meaning, as to leave me no other resource than to request of you to publish in your 'Annals' the following correction of his mistakes.

Mr. Shuckard (page 362) says, that "the fact of *Mygale* catching birds in their nets and feeding upon them has been doubted; but the probability of this has been substantiated and confirmed by a communication recently received from W. S. MacLeay, Esq., who informs us, that in the vicinity of Sidney he has met with a true bird-catching spider; having himself found one of the *Epeiridæ* actually devouring the young of a *Gasterops* that had no doubt lately flown from the nest; and which is not a solitary instance, as his father had previously observed a similar fact. He therefore retracts his

observations upon *Mygale* in the Zoological Transactions." Now this passage is, I grieve to say, a tissue of mistakes, which perhaps might have been avoided by a reference to my paper in the Zoological Transactions, and by a more accurate reading of my letter. In the first place, the bird was a *Zosterops*, not *Gasterops*; and in the second place, the only words in my printed paper on *Mygale* which I ever meant to retract, when I hastily mentioned what I considered to be a curious fact to Mr. Shuckard, were the following: "I will even go so far as to add my utter disbelief in the existence of any bird-catching spider." How Mr. Shuckard should imagine that I meant to retract all my observations on *Mygale* I know not; but I beg here to declare that I retract none of them, except the above-mentioned disbelief. I deny that the tale of *Mygale* catching birds is either "substantiated or confirmed" by another spider of totally different habits having been observed to catch them. *Mygale* is a subterranean spider, and makes no net. In short, my conviction is, that Madame Merian has told a willful falsehood respecting *Mygale*, or rather has painted a falsehood; and that her followers have too hastily placed confidence in her idle tales. My conviction is, that no *Mygale* can catch birds in its net; for, as I have said in the paper printed in the Zoological Transactions, it makes no geometrical net. Nay, further, I have proved that the genus *Nephila*, which lives in a geometrical net, does not catch birds either here or in the West Indies; and moreover, I have ascertained that birds are not the proper food of this New Holland *Epeira*, but that the observation of my father and myself is an exception to the general rule of its insectivorous habits; an exception indeed so rare, that as far as I can learn, no other person here has ever yet witnessed the fact in question but ourselves. I acquit Mr. Shuckard of course of anything like an intentional misrepresentation; but I must express my regret, that when he referred to my private letter he did not use the words of it, although I dare say they were hastily written.

I am, dear Sir, &c.,

Elizabeth Bay, near Sidney,
8th July, 1811.

W. S. MACLEAY.

XL.—*On the degree of Cold which the principal Mammalia of hot countries are capable of enduring.* By the Rev. ROBERT EVEREST, in a Note to J. E. Gray, Esq., F.R.S., &c.

DEAR SIR,

HAVING always taken an interest in the much-vexed geological question of "climate," I looked forward to a winter