

A Brief History Of An Enthusiast

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Below is a brief summary of my experiences in the hobby prior to becoming an officer of the ATS. Also, this time span represents my pre-computing days!

Never, Never Quit. 1985 – 1995. Or: Ten Years Of “What The Heck?”

1984 – I bought a copy of John Browning’s book and carried it with me everywhere I went. I used a magnifying glass to try to figure out what was going on in those pictures. I still don’t have a clue (see page 14, external anatomy). They went through the bother of labeling the spider’s ‘anus’, but paid no attention at all to the leg segments. Also, the cover photograph shows a dead tarantula on a flower.

I found out the hard way that the address given in the book for the “American Tarantula Society” in New Jersey had long been a thing of the past.

1985 – I spent \$25 on an adult female *Brachypelma smithi*, purchased at a “mom & pop” pet store. They actually had a male on display in the store, but he was in rough shape, and spending \$50 on spiders didn’t seem like a good idea at the time (even I was smarter than that!). My quest for a male *B. smithi* began (let’s not even talk about Al David’s book).

1985 –1991: I kept my female *B. smithi* for six years, thinking I might find a male in a pet shop. I knew nothing about CITES, or that any (legal) remaining *B. smithi* males in the US had likely died of old age. I was still living

in nearly a total vacuum. For my entire first six years in the hobby, I never spoke to another hobbyist. Unthinkable?

I bought a copy of *Arachnomania* by de Vosjoli. The photos by Russ Gurley also caught my attention, mainly because I never saw photos of shelves loaded with tarantulas. I also never gave any thought to charting molt cycles and feeding cycles. I wrote de Vosjoli, and he gave me Russ’s address. Russ kindly wrote back several times. I started to subscribe to tarantula dealer mailing lists.

No one, and I mean NO ONE had any male *B. smithi*, and if they did, they probably were not going to send one to me (except for one person, more on this later).

Months passed, and many letters were sent via snail mail to various folks, no progress though.

Then, by chain reaction, I located Russell Smith, Bryant Capiz, Mark Hart and a reptile dealership in Florida named Glades. More mailing list subscriptions proved to be very educational in some ways. I learned I could not afford to own many adult, wildcaught tarantulas.

1993- It was from Glades that I purchased the Hancock’s book, Anne Webb’s book, and discovered the existence of the BTS.

My subscription to the BTS revealed yet another surprise, the ATS. Where have I heard that before? Were they in New Jersey? No, South Padre Island, Texas.

So, I sent a letter to the editor, and he promptly answered me. The ATS was in its infancy, ready to grow.

1993 remains a good year for me. I successfully bred my first pair of *Grammostola rosea*, bought a pair of *Theraphosa blondi*, and received a male *B. smithi* in the mail from Russell Smith. Russell was the only person I could locate at the time who was openly willing to share in a breeding project.

I wrote some articles that were published in the BTS and the ATS. I was excited, and kept writing letters to everyone. There were no computers for me then. Just snail mail.

Getting return (hand written) letters from Anne Webb, John and Kathleen Hancock, and others kept my enthusiasm up. After all, why would these folks bother to talk to me?

I later found that most people interested in tarantulas were genuinely down to earth and friendly, embracing others who share the same passtime.

1993 – 1995 I began taking note of the cultural differences between the US and Europe. There were some distinct differences in how we viewed the use of tarantula common names, which scientific names were currently acceptable, and where newly described species should be published.

I tended to feel more comfortable toward the ATS's publishing practices (with some exceptions) and began taking inventory of why. Here's a few highlights that supported my feelings:

1992 - The ATS published an article explaining the differences between a hobbyist (enthusiast) publication and a scientific (peer reviewed) one. That clarified a lot of things for me. It put me in my place as an enthusiast.

Simply put, a person can spend years researching in the field and in literature, submit a scientific paper to an established peer reviewed publication, and have it rejected because the document was not typed or formatted to standard. A fact of life that

certainly keeps things up to standard for science.

In the ATS Forum Magazine, nearly any on topic article is acceptable, and it will be printed to satisfy the goal of presenting good/entertaining information to the enthusiast. As a non-scientific magazine, the ATS will not have any impact on the scientific world-at-large. [*Well, yes it does, just not taxonomy, and I just tell people it shouldn't be cited in scientific papers. Ed.*]

On the other hand, you WILL find non-peer reviewed "scientific" taxonomic papers published in other journals that can have some impact on arachnological studies of the future. This could be a negative impact, depending upon how bad the author's research was.

1993 - By reading the ATS Forum, I learned that *Avicularia* spp. can be kept together (at some risk) because they are rather tolerant of each other. Not social by definition. I also learned that *Pterinochilus* sp. spiderlings kept communally will molt less frequently than their siblings who were kept alone. It wasn't long before I experimented with this myself and found the same results.

Again, realize that this is not scientific proof, but very helpful to anyone experimenting with spider communes.

1993 - The first article I've seen about whipscorpions appeared in the Forum. After reading it, I acquired some.

1993 - Some new information about *T. blondi* growth rates from Marshall and Uetz.

1993 - Now that many "bad tempered" spiders were entering the hobby, a method of cooling them down in the fridge helped me get through many cage transfers.

1994 – A tabloid TV article forever changed my view of the media at large, especially when the subject matter is arachnids.

1994 - Tarantula life stages. Eclosion, 1st molt into postembryo, followed by numbered instars, then penultimate, ultimate, and postultimate. This linear approach applied

logic to spider development, where many others still refer to “larvae,” “nymphs,” “prelarvae,” “juveniles” etc.

1994 - No small feat, every current edition of tarantula books was reviewed, and a species equivalent list was presented. This essentially updated and revised all books on the market with correct scientific names. Current AAS accepted common names were appended, hoping to set good example by using a set of common name rules. Was anyone listening? Some did.

1994 - Jason Dunlop presented an article on spider fossils. An eye-opener, on a very obscure subject, but nevertheless printed in the Forum for the first time.

1995 - Many articles followed by writers such as Bill Stanton, who covered specific care guidelines for *Avicularia*, *Haplopelma*, and many other genera. Found nowhere else.

1995 - The year ended abruptly with the notion that many tarantula dealers who once supported the ATS were now turning away. In fact, as a subscriber to nearly every dealer (paper) mail list in the US, it was clear that the existence of the ATS was withheld from their customer base. This troubled me.

By 1995, I had established a good working relationship with the ATS, and was very happy with my membership. I had learned so much reading the Forum, and it became a normal part of my life as a contributor. I was a regular customer of many US tarantula dealers. It was only a matter of time before I started asking dealers why they deliberately withheld info about the ATS to their customers. As an analogy, it reminded me of my first six years in the hobby, not communicating with anyone about tarantulas. Ironically, it was the BTS that told me about the ATS. One would assume that would be the LAST place an American would find out about the ATS.

One dealer retorted with an analogy “If I were a car dealer, I would not tell you about a dishonest mechanic down the street.”

It was becoming more and more clear that a difference in agendas between some dealers and the ATS was growing wider. What is more important to the hobby itself, individual dealers with sour grapes or an entire society dedicated to serving its members? It was time to decide.

To reinforce my opinions, I began to take inventory of all the benefits belonging to the ATS (see my list above) vs. relying on the word of the very few who would deny it. Look back as we just have on the first few years of the ATS, at all the great information and hard work. Examine what the few dealers contributed, and the choice is clear.

Those of you here today represent the spirit and enthusiasm that will keep the ATS alive for another decade and beyond.