

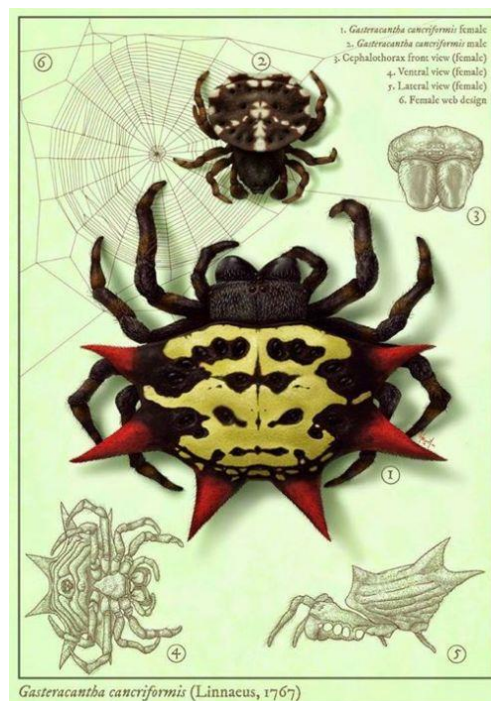
The Spider Club News

Edited by Rudolph Steenkamp



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"The Spider Club provides a fun, responsible, social learning experience, centered on spiders, their relatives and on nature in general."



Tribute to a titan

Norman Platnick (30 December 1951 – 8 April 2020)

It is with much sadness that we mourn the passing of Dr. Norman I. Platnick, Curator Emeritus. The following was prepared by Lorenzo Prendini, Curator of Arachnida and Myriapoda, Division of Invertebrate Zoology, with contributions and assistance from Will Platnick, Toby Schuh, Gustavo Hormiga, Martín Ramírez, Ricardo Botero-Trujillo, Lou Sorkin, Dave Grimaldi, Tim Crowe, Theo Blick and Daniel Gloor.

[Dr Norman Ira Platnick](#), Curator Emeritus at the American Museum of Natural History (AMNH), New York, passed on April 8 in Philadelphia, PA, after a tragic accident. He married the late Nancy Stewart Price in 1970 and is survived by his son, William Durin Platnick, and daughter-in-law, Rebecca Ehrlich.

Norm was born on December 30, 1951, in Bluefield, WV, where he grew up. Getting what he called a 'precocious start', Norm became a college freshman at the tender age of 12, receiving a BS degree at 16, MS at 18, and PhD at 21. He has remarked that he lacked 'a high school diploma, having made it only through grade 7'! The world authority on spiders, Norm's lifelong interest began serendipitously while a teenager, majoring in Biology at Concord College, Athens, WV, as a direct consequence of meeting his future wife, Nancy, 'at Concord on October 12, 1967.' Their son, Will, maintains that his father's passion for spiders started because he 'tried to impress a girl.' Nancy, also pursuing a BS in Biology, had taken a course on arthropods and become fascinated with millipedes. According to Will, 'my mom was an excellent collector and, when she went out, my dad would tag along to spend time with her.' Norm was less successful at finding millipedes but collected spiders in abundance and tried to identify them back at college. The rest is history.

After graduating from Concord in 1968, Norm moved to Michigan State University, East Lansing, MI, where he was advised by Richard Sauer and graduated with a MS in Zoology in 1970, and finally to Harvard University, Cambridge, MA, where he was advised by Ernst Mayr and Herbert Levi, and graduated with a PhD in Biology in 1973. He was appointed Assistant Curator in the AMNH Department of Entomology the same year, received tenure and promotion to Associate Curator in 1977, and promotion to Curator in 1982. He was awarded an endowed chair as Peter J. Solomon Family Curator of Spiders in 1998 and served in that capacity until retiring, whereupon he became Senior Scientist in Residence at the AMNH Division of Invertebrate Zoology (2010–2013).

As an AMNH Curator, Norm took over stewardship of the Collections of Arachnida and Myriapoda from John Cooke, building on the legacy of Willis J. Gertsch to continue developing the spider collection into the world's largest and most taxonomically comprehensive, a global resource with over a million specimens and 4,000 types. Norm's arachnological expeditions to Chile, as well as Argentina, Australia, Brazil, Cuba, Ecuador, New Caledonia, New Zealand, and Panama, were supported by \$4.3 million in research grants from the National Science Foundation (NSF), the National Geographic Society, and other foundations. As Chairman of the Department of Entomology (1987–1994), Norm secured two NSF grants that enhanced ongoing curation of the terrestrial arthropod collections, partially supporting construction of the insect compactor, followed by an instrumentation grant to acquire a scanning electron microscope for the AMNH. He also served as Chair of the Scientific Senate (2006–2008). In addition to his position as Curator at the AMNH, Norm served as adjunct professor at City College, City University of New York (1978–2014), and Cornell University (1988–2014), and as adjunct senior research scientist for the Center of Environmental Research and Conservation at Columbia University (1999–2014).

Norm was a prolific scientist, publishing over 4000 pages in 330 papers, including 37 monographs, six books and two edited volumes over the course of his four-decade career. This exceptional body of work fundamentally affected several fields. His early works, including the

influential book 'Systematics and biogeography: Cladistics and vicariance,' coauthored with Gareth Nelson, and seminal papers on areas of endemism, species concepts, cladistic analysis of linguistic sequences, and the history and philosophy of systematics, among others, were instrumental in disseminating Hennigian tree-thinking and phylogenetic classification, profoundly influencing systematic biology, historical biogeography, and evolutionary biology more generally.

In arachnology, the study of spiders and their kin, Norm laid the framework of spider classification and the Tree of Life early on, along with introducing new techniques, such as scanning electron microscopy, and character systems, such as spinneret morphology, which forever changed the course of spider systematics. His prodigious monographic revisions and many smaller papers, on most of which he was sole or lead author, added 158 new genera and 2023 new species of spiders (including many novelties such as *Neato*, *Oreo*, *Queenvic*, *Notnops*, *Nyetnops*, *Taintnops*, *Tisentnops*, *Paradysderina righty*, and *Paradysderina lefty*), vastly increasing knowledge of spider diversity on a global scale, and especially the poorly known fauna of the Southern Hemisphere, to currently more than 48,000 species. An authority on at least ten spider families, Norm described taxa in some 50 of the 120 families currently recognized, spanning all three suborders, as well as the arachnid order Ricinulei (hooded tick-spiders), in which he described a new genus and 12 new species. His contributions, together with the [World Spider Catalog](#), which he created as a unified nomenclatural and taxonomic resource, and single-handedly updated annually over the course of two decades, elevated spiders to a unique position. Unlike most other non-vertebrate taxa of comparable diversity, spiders now enjoy a completely up-to-date, online, species-level taxonomic database extending from Linnaeus to the present. In recognition of his contributions, Norm was made Fellow of the American Association for the Advancement of Science in 2003 and received the Pierre Bonnet Award for Devoted Service to the Advancement of Arachnology in 2007, among other honors. Four spider genera, *Normplatnicka*, *Platnickia*, *Platnickina* and *Platnicknia* (= *Modisimus*) and 47 species of spiders, other arachnids, and a millipede are named after him.

Keenly aware of the threats facing biodiversity, Norm was actively involved in initiatives to address the 'taxonomic impediment' by accelerating the pace of species discovery and description, including programs such as Systematics Agenda 2000: Charting the Biosphere, and received major grants implementing automated methods of species identification and description, and training the next generation of taxon specialists (e.g., the NSF Partnerships for Enhancing Expertise in Taxonomy). This vision culminated in the Planetary Biodiversity Inventories (PBI) and Revisionary Syntheses in Systematics programs which he co-developed during his tenure as Program Director for Biodiversity Surveys and Inventories in the NSF Division of Environmental Biology (2002–2003). In 2006, Norm put these approaches into practice on a global scale with his [PBI grant](#) on the megadiverse, microdistributed goblin spider family Oonopidae, involving more than 45 collaborating scientists in ten countries worldwide. Over the course of eight years, using custom-built cyberinfrastructure, 1056 new spider species were described in 88 papers, increasing global spider diversity by 2.5% and moving Oonopidae from the 21st to the 8th most speciose family of spiders.

In addition to his role as fellow, president or councilor of numerous scientific societies, several of which he was instrumental in founding, and his service on copious editorial boards and scientific panels, Norm leaves a rich legacy in education. He advised or served on the committees of over 20 students and postdoctoral fellows, many of whom went on to illustrious careers in arachnology and systematics, around the world, and delivered about 100 scientific lectures in the US and abroad. The original [spider man](#), Norm promoted the old adage 'if you wish to live and thrive, let a spider run alive' via diverse media, including the highly successful [Spiders Alive!](#) exhibition (2012–2013,

and again in 2015), two children's books on spiders, several popular magazine articles, and online videos, such as '[Seeking Spiders – Biodiversity on a Different Scale](#)', where he notes: 'if we wish to conserve as much biodiversity as possible, then we need to pay attention not just to the things that are easy to see, but also to the ones that are not so easy to see and tell us much more about the planet.'

In his spare time, Norm enjoyed 'another life' as an art aficionado, the origins of which, like his obsession with spiders, were 'entirely Nancy's fault!' While frequenting antique shops with Nancy, who collected vintage eggbeaters, mixers and other mechanical kitchen devices, Norm became interested in the art of magazine covers, advertisements, and articles from America's 'Golden Age of Illustration' (1905–1920), ultimately amassing a collection of over 6500 pieces. Between 1998 and 2020, Norm wrote 27 full-color books and three articles on the work of various artists from this period, a labor of love, demanding considerable time and energy to [self-publish](#), and was planning 'at least as many more.'

Norm's generous [personality](#), fierce intellect, and indomitable can-do approach won friends and admirers across the globe. His motto, 'The best is none too good,' long hanging on his office wall and still seen on his [Facebook page](#), speaks volumes about his attitude to his pursuits. When Norm first moved to New York, he and Nancy rented a ground floor apartment, on what was then a seedy West 80th Street, a block from his office at the AMNH. His friend and colleague, Toby Schuh, recalls 'many a day when Norm would come to the AMNH at 2 or 3 am, do several hours work, and return home to have breakfast with his beloved wife before she left for work, returning to complete what for most would be a whole day's effort.'



Dr Norman I. Platnick (1951–2020)