

SCIENCE

# India's 'Spiderman' And His Endless Fascination With 8-Legged Beauties

By Kavita Majumdar · 29 May, 2018 · TWC India



*Stenaelurillus gabrieli*, one of the spider species discovered by Dhruv Prajapati (Pic: Dhruv Prajapati)

It's tiny, has eight legs, and is mostly harmless, yet it is one of the most feared creatures on Earth. Yes, we are talking about the humble spider. And while most humans can't resist picking up a broom to shoo these tiny arachnids away, a few stare at the creature with pure fascination. Dhruv Prajapati, a young researcher from Gujarat, is one of the latter. The 26-year-old is one of very few arachnological researchers in India. In fact, while researching for his Master's dissertation he managed to identify 77 species of spiders all within the Gujarat University campus in India. Some of these were quite rare and few knew of their existence in the state. In 2016, Prajapati was awarded the Young Naturalist Award by wildlife and nature conservation magazine Sanctuary Asia. We spoke to the young man who is now pursuing a PhD in spider diversity from the Bharathiar University, Coimbatore. Over the past three years, he has conducted an in-depth study on these creatures spanning from the Western Ghats of Gujarat to Maharashtra, Goa and Kerala.

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During his research, Prajapati has identified seven confirmed new species of Indian spiders.

- Two of these belong to the ant-eating spider genus *Tropizodium* that are incredibly rare and have for the first time been reported from India. He has named one of these *Kalami*, after the country's late President Dr APJ Abdul Kalam and the other is called *viridurbium*.
- The third and the fourth species, *Cambalida tuma* and *Cambalida deorsa*, belong to the genus *Cambalida* that was so far believed to be endemic to Africa and were reported by Dhruv for the first time in Asia.
- The fifth and the sixth species are from the jumping spider family *Salticidae* - *Stenaelurillus gabrieli* (named after Padmabhushan awardee Dr Fr. Gabriel CMI, founder of the zoology department in Sacred Heart College, Thevara, Kochi), and *Langelurillus onyx*. *Langelurillus* is also an African genus and was reported in Asia for the first time.
- The seventh one is *Meotipa multuma* from the family *Theridiidae*.

All these new findings were published in [Zootaxa](#), one of the world's leading scientific journals from New Zealand. Prajapati is also working on a bunch of research papers on new species, which, when approved by the international reviewers, will be added to his kitty of discoveries.

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Dhruv Prajapati

On being asked how dangerous the feared creatures are, he confidently replied, "most species are not harmful. And while almost all species have a certain amount of venom, they can only harm small creatures that are their prey and if they happen to bite a human, which is quite rare, they can cause just a small infection." That being said, he added that Australian and North American spiders are much more venomous, though they don't attack humans very often. Not only are spiders supremely beneficial to nature, some species are really quite pretty. A particular favourite of Prajapati's is the Peacock Spider that is found in Australia. Like birds, male Peacock Spiders court females by showing off their colourful abdomens that have flaps which they raise while dancing, to impress the female. He also reiterated how important spiders are to our ecology. "Spiders help in regulating insect population. In fact, 80% of the insect population is eradicated by spiders, which is much more than that of birds, and this helps farmers significantly." Ground spiders can also detect soil toxicity as they are sensitive to metal pollution in soil. And should they enter your homes, hold back your urge to screech and call for help, for they are also getting rid of the actual pests in your house, including mosquitoes and other bugs that bite, annoy and spread disease.

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