

ACADIAN FLYCATCHER CAUGHT IN THE WEB OF A GOLDEN SILK ORB-WEAVER

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The golden silk orb-weaver (*Nephila clavipes*), which is known as the “banana spider” in many parts of Florida, creates strong webs (Griffiths and Salanitri 1980) capable of ensnaring a variety of invertebrate prey (Robinson and Mirick 1971). Orb-weaver webs also are capable of ensnaring small birds, particularly hummingbirds (Graham 1997), but published accounts of this phenomenon are uncommon. We report a case of an Acadian Flycatcher (*Empidonax vireescens*) becoming ensnared in the web of a golden silk orb-weaver in Florida.

The spider web was constructed under the eave of our home in Tallahassee (Leon Co.) approximately 2 m above the ground. We discovered the ensnared flycatcher (Fig. 1) on 23 September 2006 at 14:30. We watched the bird struggle for approximately 5 min, and when it appeared incapable of freeing itself, we removed it from the web. The bird was identified as an after-hatch-year Acadian Flycatcher based on the yellow wash along the flanks and lower belly, the truncated shape of the retrices, and the absence of a yellow wash along the throat (Pyle 1997). The bird was released after webbing stuck to the body was removed.

Bibliographic and Internet searches unearthed two published records and several anecdotal reports of birds ensnared in the webs of this orb-weaver. Graham (1997) found *Phaethornis* hummingbirds ensnared in the webs of silk orb-weavers in Central America and suggested this might be a potentially important source of mortality for tropical hummingbirds. Forbush and May (1939) found fledgling White-eyed Vireos (*Vireo griseus*) entangled in the webs of silk orb-weavers in Bermuda. Archives of on-line listserves (e.g., Floridabirds-L, BirdChat, and Georgia Birds on-line) provided additional reports of Northern Parula (*Parula americana*), American Redstart (*Setophaga ruticilla*), Magnolia Warbler (*Dendroica magnolia*), Wilson’s Warbler (*Wilsonia pusilla*), and Hooded Warbler (*Wilsonia citrina*) caught in webs that most likely were constructed by the golden silk orb-weaver. Finally, Bent’s (1953) account of the Yellow-throated Warbler (*Dendroica dominica*) described this species becoming entangled in tough spider webs that also were most likely constructed by *N. clavipes*.

The case we observed seemed noteworthy because the mass of Acadian Flycatcher (12-14 g, Whitehead and Taylor 2002) is greater than the mass (<10 g) of many of the other bird species found in webs of this orb-weaver and those of other spiders (e.g., McKenzie 1991, Ross 1950, Stott 1951). An exception in the case of the golden silk orb-weaver is the fledged White-eyed Vireos recorded by Forbush and May (1939). This vireo has a mass similar to that of Acadian Flycatcher, however Forbush and May (1939) suggested the weaker flight of fledgling vireos was a contributing factor to the captures they observed. The incident we observed involved an adult in migration and capable of rapid, darting flight (Whitehead and Taylor 2002). The flycatcher also may have been pursuing prey that was trapped in the web.

Species of *Nephila* found in Asia, Australia, and Africa capture and eat small birds frequently (Robinson and Robinson 1976). The largest bird reported to have been captured in a *Nephila* web was a 30-35 g Lewin’s Honeyeater (*Meliphaga lewinii*, Anonymous 2006). Species of *Nephila* that catch and eat birds all are larger than *N. clavipes* at



Figure 1. Acadian Flycatcher caught in the web of a golden silk orb-weaver.

maturity, and *Nephila* with larger body sizes are known to create thicker silk strands potentially capable of withstanding greater forces (Griffiths and Salanitri 1980). Even so, a slow approach speed and indirect angle could lead to the occasional entrapment in spider webs of birds much larger than the Acadian Flycatcher. Pratt (1974) found a 90-110 g Black-faced Cuckoo-Shrike (*Coracina novaehollandiae*) trapped in the web of a European spider, while Terres (1939) found an 18 g Grasshopper Sparrow (*Ammodramus savannarum*) ensnared in a low-hanging spider web in New York.

The golden silk orb-weaver disables large prey items by wrapping the prey in additional webbing. The orb-weaver we watched did not venture near the flycatcher, and we found no reports of this species eating birds trapped in their webs. Silk orb-weavers cut their webs to free large, non-prey items such as leaves and twigs (Robinson and Mirick 1971). This report may have benefitted by allowing nature to run its course and determining whether the spider eventually ate or released the flycatcher once it had expired. However, the web was near our dining table, and this swayed us to provide a helping hand to one of the subjects.

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