

# Spider Hunters

**In a habitat that alters itself with each passing season, we learn about a puzzling wasp that uses spider as food for its larvae.**

**Text & images:  
Indranil Banerjee**

**N**estled in the outskirts of Kolkata, the The Chintamani Kar Bird Sanctuary (CKBS), Narendrapur is a haven for naturalists. The thick green within the urban jungle not only ensures a natural habitat for its huge collection of butterflies, birds and insects but also serves as a perfect weekend get-away for people like us from the daily hustle of the city life. Seasonal changes also transform this green oasis. During the humid summers, the dense foliage is impenetrable, the rains keep it moist, muddy and slushy while the winter ensure lot of dry spikes across the sanctuary. The place has always offered with bountiful subjects to hone my skills in photography.

On one such weekend visit to CKBS, I encountered a particular species of wasp, which captivated me with its antics! I witnessed a sudden spate of violence at the ground. A wasp of around 16mm, black in colour with orange hind legs, suddenly smothered a spider and a deadly fight ensued. What caught my lenses was the winning punch by the Wasp who then violently grasped the spider and flew away. Amazed, I stood there trying to realise what happened.

A Wasp of that size actually flew away with a Spider double its size? Once back home, I sat at my work desk trying to fathom what I had shot and that's when a new world opened up to me.



Lesser known to us, this Spider Wasp (*Auplopus mellipes*) observed was an adult female. These wasps are expert spider hunters which are the major food for their growing larvae. Female wasps keep a watch out for the lonely spider that must have ventured out in search of its own food. Once spotted, they attack the spider with all their might. A savage fight ensues and it is usually the wasp which is victorious. The wasp does not kill the spider, rather it just paralyses it with its venom and leaves it alive. Often, they also chop off its single or all legs to ease in transportation. They either drag it to their nest that they might have built on the ground or fly away with it to its nest if made in a corner of a building or a tree.

Unlike other wasps, this spider wasp builds a single cell nest. The spider, still alive and stunned by the fierce venom attack, is brought into the cell and the female wasp lays an egg on it. It then leaves the nest but takes another step to ensure safety and security of the egg left inside. If it has built the nest on the ground, it blocks the entrance to it with dead ants. The dead ants emanate a strange smell that keeps predators off the nest.

The egg slowly hatches into a larva and starts feeding on the paralysed spider inside out. It punctures the abdomen and starts devouring the intestines. It grows feeding on it and spends the entire summer and spring inside the nest. Apparently the size of the spider decides the sex of the growing larva. The larger the spider and hence a larger food supplied, the larva turns into a female wasp. This voracious feeding habit is only found during the larval stage in contrast to the adults that survive on plant juices and flower nectars. It never ceases to amaze that a spider almost double the size of the wasp lost to this gruesome battle! As they say; it's the survival of the fittest.

