



Parachuting in pitch darkness

“A hairy venomous creature with eight legs lives in that tamarind grove, climbing and waiting for the right moment, hiding in the burrow of a tree, when you get close, it

deliberately pounces, attaches itself to your neck and that will be your last day”. – Fictional grandmother from Aryagundur village.

That afternoon Sanjay and Ravi, our mentors, were missing from our group, they had gone to the tamarind grove in Aryagundur Village in Rameshwaram to ask permission for the Ram Hattikudur Advanced Training in Conservation batch 2022–23, which I am very proud to be part of, to visit and survey the place for tarantulas, specifically the Rameshwaram Parachute Spider *Poecilotheria hanumavilasumica*, an old world arboreal theraphosid spider. When they returned my heart was beating fast, I was very excited because permission was approved, I was going to the tamarind grove, I was also unsure if we would be able to spot the arachnid because they reside in burrows high on the tree. On the evening before Christmas at 1830 h, we were instructed to carry torches and cameras. We boarded four cars and adjusted our seats and our minds to get prepared for a dopamine rush. But on the Pamban bridge, we were stuck in a traffic jam. I looked at the time it was 1900 h, I wish I could just run, I was feeling restless. Finally, we reached the grove enveloped by the night sky, an eerie first experience for me. Sanjay and Ravi led the path to the grove and when they opened the gate, my heart was Bolting.

We started our trail by pairing up. It was pitch dark, the dried leaves rustled with each footstep, anticipation was building up. Everyone was thoroughly scrutinizing each tree each branch. I am trying to tip toe and see as high as I can. As I was trying to look up, I was missing out on biodiversity right under our feet, other spotted and called my attention toward tiger beetles, millipedes, and two species of frogs Banded Bull frog *Kaloula pulchra* and Ornate narrow-mouthed frog *Microhyla ornata*.

From a distance I could see everyone gather around a tree; tarantulas are sensitive to vibrations so I tried to move fast but carefully, but it was a whip scorpion. Then a little later, with enthusiasm Sanjay called us close to him, everything became still and silent, there were no thoughts for a brief moment. The lesser-known but magnificent Critically Endangered Tarantula, the Rameshwaram Parachute Spider was peeking, with its fangs clearly visible from a webbed burrow of a Tamarind tree *Tamarindus indica*. The tree looked like it was hosting a rare exhibit with pride and confidence. Pointing our torchlights at the tarantula, we waited for it to ambush an unsuspecting prey at the mouth of the burrow. The tarantula was actually least bothered about us around it. Then Rajib Saha, one of the fellow mates, spotted an elegant wolf snake as it glid past gracefully along the bark.

We were privileged to witness 35–40 tarantulas, adults and juveniles. Sanjay explained to us some of its behaviours and recalled his experiences with tarantulas in different locations. We listened to Ravi share his experiences from the past surveys with Manju Siliwal in the mid 2000s, initial days when much data was available, the duo had courageously surveyed such pitch-dark places to gather data over several seasons. In general, Juveniles were about 2 inches and adult tarantulas were approximately 3–3.5 inches in length. We also spotted puff balls, the fruiting body of fungus, a stick insect, black widow spiders, and a palm civet cat.

I felt content with such a unique experience, I made a photo memory to be stored in my pensieve of memories. I enjoyed the trail to be remembered for a lifetime. This experience was about connection, a connection with an arachnid; this Rameshwaram Parachute Spider will act as a symbol which will take me close to conservation. I will visit this memory whenever I feel disconnected or doubtful.

Soham Parnaik, RHATC Fellow 2022–23,
 Zoo Outreach Organisation, Coimbatore, TN, India.