See the often unseen in FAU photo exhibit

Graduate student gets down and dirty with South Florida insects in colorful display

BY PHILLIP VALYS
Staff writer

Two months ago, chemistry student Efrem Goldberg grabbed his Nikon SLR and trudged through knee-high grass, rubber rain boots at Big Cypress Nature Preserve.

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Swarms of mosquitoes nipped his arms and face, a snake disturbed the wall of saw grass nearby, and Goldberg, ignoring all this, trained his camera lens on a hanging robber fly, an insect dangling by its two hind legs from a blade of grass.

The predator was busy devouring a dead honey bee. "I must have gotten bitten by mosquitoes dozens of times, but I was thinking, 'This is too good to be true.' I'd been looking for this certain species of fly that only hunts bees and wasps for eight freaking months," said the Florida Atlantic University graduate student, who lives in Hollywood. "Nervousness, excitement, I almost dropped my camera. I was wishing, 'Please don't finish eating before I take the picture.'"

The resulting photograph, "Robber Fly With Honey Bee," is on display alongside 15 other photographs — each snapped with an equally extraordinary level of patience — for Goldberg's new exhibit, "The Unseen World Around Us." The show, on view through Oct. 1 on the ground-floor of FAU's Wimberly Library, examines all manner of South Florida's creepy, crawly creatures, including extreme close-ups of a striped horse fly, an emerald-colored orchid bee and a mangrove skipper.

Captured in vivid detail, the photos were taken in areas Goldberg, 27, described as "your own backyard.

"A lot of these insects I photograph could be feet away from people every day, and they don't see them because they're not looking," said Goldberg, who, though raised in Costa Rica around nature, never picked up a camera until last summer. "But when you are looking, they're basically everywhere: building nests, gathering food, and all that comes back to science in the end. My background is in chemistry, so I'm walking into new territory every time with the insects.

Goldberg, who received a macrophotography book while visiting his father in China, immediately took to South Florida parks when he returned. He said he reversed the lenses on his Nikon to achieve stunning close-ups without resorting to a more-expensive camera. Since then, he's been frequenting the open-grass fields of Big Cypress; the butterfly gardens of Secret Woods Nature Center, in Davie; the adjoining West Lake Park and Anne Kolb Nature Center, in Hollywood; and a stretch of undeveloped land across the street from the Miramar Park of Commerce. In December, Goldberg spotted a nest of jumping spiders in Miramar; a spider leaped onto his lens.

"I threw the camera on the ground," Goldberg recalled with a laugh. "A lot of places in South Florida have plenty of biodiversity in it. I just love being surrounded by nature, and freeing my mind from the normal stresses of life. People go fishing to get away from life's problems. I'm out looking for wasps and bees.

Florida Atlantic University graduate student Efrem Goldberg's "Orchid Bee Flying" is part of his new exhibit, "The Unseen World Around Us," running through Oct. 1 at FAU's Wimberly Library in Boca Raton. Admission is free.