

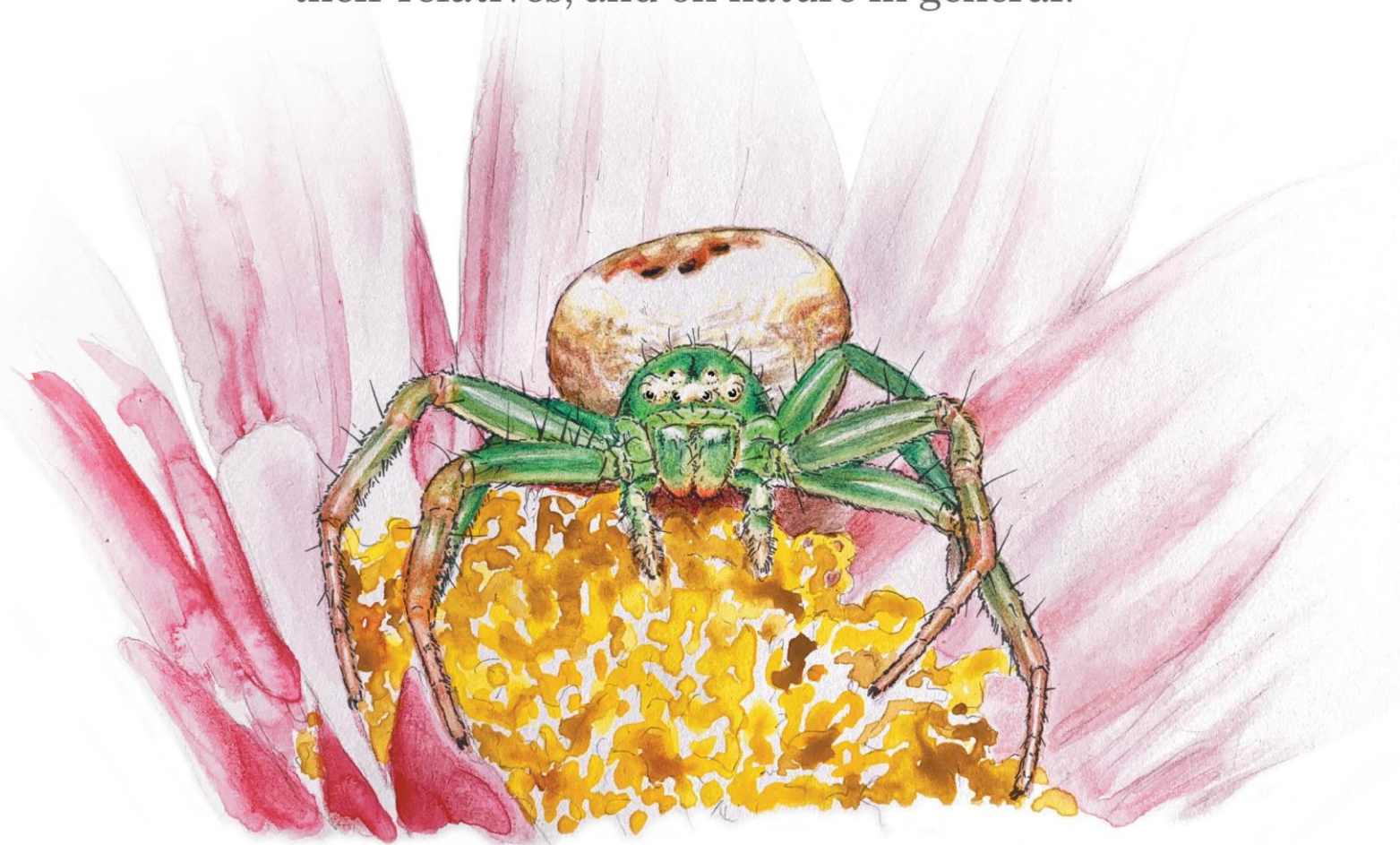
The Spider Club NEWS

September 2023



Vol. 39, No. 3

“The Spider Club provides a fun, responsible, social learning experience, centred on spiders, their relatives, and on nature in general.”



SPRING EDITION

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About the Spider Club

The Spider Club of Southern Africa is a non-profit organisation. Our aim is to encourage an interest in all arachnids and to promote this interest and the study of these animals by all suitable means.

Membership is open to anyone. People interested in joining the club may apply to any committee member for information.

Field outings, day visits, arachnid surveys and demonstrations, workshops, and exhibits are arranged from time to time. A diary of events and outings is published at the end of this newsletter.

Contact us

WEBSITE: <http://www.spiderclub.co.za>

EMAIL ADDRESS: info@spiderclub.co.za



at "The Spider Club of Southern Africa"

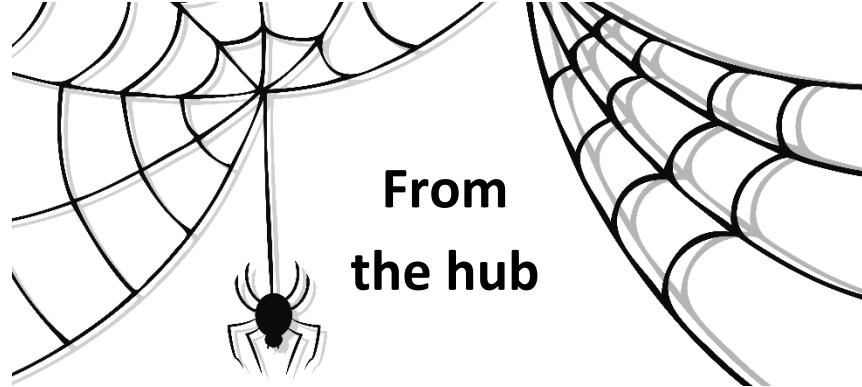
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Acknowledgements:

Our sincere gratitude goes to the following people for this edition of the newsletter:

- All the photographers of the photos used in this edition. Without you, these pages would be very dull.
- Astri Leroy, of course, for all her contributions, and informing me of any new content, as well as the entire SCSA Committee (Roulla, Jarrod, Henning, Desiré, Ruan, Joanie, Caren, and Jèan-Pierre) for their contributions.
- Jeanne van Aswegen, my colleague at Grammar Guardians and superior half, for proofreading the newsletter.
- Everyone on SCSA for all the interesting content.
- All the readers of this newsletter, and all the positive feedback we receive. Of course, keep the negative feedback coming, so that we can improve on this newsletter. All the readers of this newsletter, and all the positive feedback we receive. Of course, keep the negative feedback coming, so that we can improve on this newsletter.



.Yay, it's spring again! Nature is coming to life again, and our spider friends are returning, either from their winter hiding places, or hatching. That also means that after a long absence of spider walks, we can go out and look for spiders again without freezing to death. Our very first spider walk of the season was recently held in Groenkloof Nature Reserve, which is one of the few places where the rare Gauteng cave violin spider (*Loxosceles speluncarum*) can be found. Fortunately for the attendees of the walk, one was found and they could witness first-hand how placid these spiders are when Jarrod handled it. See the report on this walk on page 17.

Before spring arrived, we had to hold our events indoors, and Jarrod organised not one but two spider identification courses in the winter, in collaboration with Petro Marais and Robin Lyle at the Agricultural Research Council (ARC). A huge thank you to Petro and Robin for the use of their facilities, as well as their valuable input. One of our budding new members, Kira Bouwer, wrote a short report on one of these courses on page 14. Kira also wrote a short piece on the Groenkloof Spider Walk.

The month of August marked my first year as chairperson of the Spider Club, after taking over from Astri Leroy, who recently turned 80 years old on 6 September. Congratulations, Astri, and best wishes for this decade! Thanks to her guidance, and the support of the rest of the club, my first year went off without a much of a hitch, or not much that would make me want to quit. It still means a lot of responsibilities behind the scenes, and together with the responsibilities of creating the newsletter every three months, running the Spider of the Month (SOTM) every month, and now and then helping out with the SANSA newsletter, I'm practically always busy with spider stuff. Ruan Booysen and I also gave a spider presentation at VetHealth Animal Clinic recently (see page 16). This presentation was made available to other committee members, admins, and moderators in case they want to present their version in their area, so expect to see some presentations in other parts of the country.

In addition to the above responsibilities, the work load recently increased when Struik Nature asked me if I am interested in being the author of *Kids' Spiders of Southern Africa*. Of course I said yes, even though I will struggle to find time for it. It will be the third book in their series; the first one being about birds, and the second about snakes. Of course I'm going to rely on many club members for photos that I don't have and that would pique kids' interests in spiders and eventually become one of the "spider folk".

Struik Nature, which is a division of Penguin Random House, also recently published the long-awaited *Field Guide to the Spiders of South Africa*, written by Ansie Dippenaar-Schoeman. Unfortunately, we didn't have enough time to organise a proper book review of this guide for this edition of the newsletter, but we will definitely include one in the December edition. What I can say about it is that many new photographers' photos are included in the updated edition that weren't in the previous edition, and many of those photographers are Spider Club members, such as committee members like Ruan Booysen, Desiré Pelser, Jarrod Todd, and yours truly; regular posters, like Cecile Roux, Andrea Sander, and Bruce Blake; and of course photographers from the previous edition, like Vida van der Walt

and the late Peter Webb. Even the well-known Singaporean macro photographer, Nicky Bay, graces the pages with some of the photos he took in Mozambique and Madagascar.

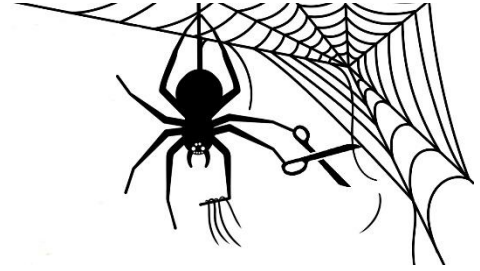
With the spring/summer season also comes the resspreading of the hoax on WhatsApp and social media that a family of six died after drinking water from a kettle in which a violin spider drowned. This hoax has been doing the rounds for 10 years now, and even after proven false many times, it still rears its ugly head and scares people into constantly checking their kettles for any dangerous spiders that might have drowned. Another piece of false info that we're expecting to pop up again is how violin spiders are invading South African homes due to the hotter and wetter weather. On the topic of hoaxes and myths, Benjamin Carbuccia wrote a piece about three common myths surrounding spiders that keep emerging. See his very detailed account on these hoaxes on page 23.

Cecile Roux has been writing about the spiders she finds in the Western Cape area for the last year now, and has showcased her finds in four previous issues of the newsletter. This time she wrote about the spiders of the West Coast (see page 38). She recently travelled to the Northern Cape and found some really interesting spiders, which shows that the western parts of South Africa have just as interesting a variety of spiders as the eastern parts. We hope that she will write about her finds in the next issue.

That's all from me. Once again, if you want to write something for the newsletter, or have any questions, please contact the Spider Club at info@spiderclub.co.za. I hope you enjoy this issue, and thanks for reading!

- Rudi Steenkamp -

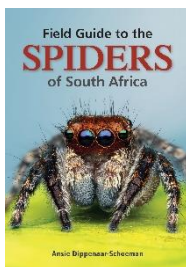
Snippets



Kids' Spiders of Southern Africa

Struik Nature, under Penguin Random House, is planning a children's book about spiders, titled *Kids' Spiders of Southern Africa*. This forms part of their nature series, which so far has two books: one about birds and one about snakes. Rudi Steenkamp, the chairperson of The Spider Club of Southern Africa, was chosen to author the spider book. Unfortunately it will still be some time before it is available on the shelves; at least a year or two.

New field guide and Ansie's spider talk on YouTube



Ansie Dippenaar-Schoeman's long-awaited update to *Field Guide to the Spiders of South Africa* has hit the shelves in early August. It is available in most bookstores and online.

To promote the book and to just talk about all things spider-related, she presented a talk on 6 September as part of the Kirstenbosch Wednesday Talks. The talk can be viewed on YouTube here: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=c_DydqVUiUU

Only non-venomous family uses toxins in gut to kill prey



The only non-venomous spider family in the world, the Uloboridae, has for long been known to not contain no venom glands, but a recent study¹

showed that some toxins are produced in the gut, which are excreted as digestive fluids over the food parcel once the prey is wrapped up. These toxins are apparently neurotoxins that help to immobilise the prey. Most Uloboridae can crush their prey in silk (in some cases more than 100 metres of silk), but it seems as if toxins also come into play in killing the prey.

New website for taxonomic research

Luis Roque sent the following message to the British Arachnological Society regarding a new website dedicated to taxonomic research around the world:

"Over the last few months, Arácnido has been transitioning from social media outlets to a website, solely dedicated to providing the scientific community and citizen scientists alike with timely scientific publication updates as they relate to taxonomic changes in both the orders of Araneae, as well as Scorpiones. The site, as well as my interest in its development, has been to emphasize the infraorder mygalomorph in Araneae, as well as all publications related to Venomics. You will notice that the site has been tabbed accordingly to make navigating and finding related publications easier. Please make sure that you share this information with other colleagues and friends so that they can also access the site at their leisure. Please note that you can follow either with an RSS feeder application or by simply clicking on 'Follow'; these are both located on the right-hand side of the panel on the site's home page. Thank you again for your continued support, and please remember to

¹ Peng, X., Dederichs, T.L., Michalik, P., Mucciolo, A., Robinson-Rechavi, M. & Zancoli, G. 2023. Beyond venomous fangs: Uloboridae spiders have lost their venom glands. *The Spider Club News: September 2023 – Volume 39, No. 3*

apparatus but not their toxins. Available at: <https://www.biorxiv.org/content/10.1101/2023.06.26.546488v1.full#ref-46>

follow and subscribe. This way, you ensure that you receive timely and concise information regarding the most recent scientific publications, news, and events within the arachnid community.”

The website can be found here:
<https://www.aracnidotaxonomy.com/>

In memoriam

The International Society of Arachnology (ISA) recently informed its members of the sad passing of the following arachnologists:

Michael Gray (25 August 1941 – 28 July 2023)



Dr Gray at one of his many public engagements in the 1990s. Source unknown.

Dr Gray was a senior fellow at the Australian Museum in Sydney, and specialised in cave-dwelling spiders, as well as funnel-web spiders (Atracidae). He also worked with Geoff Isbister to refute the myth of the flesh-eating necrosis of bites from white-tail spiders (*Lampona* spp.), which resulted in them being nominated as finalists in the 2004 Australian Skeptics Eureka Prize for Critical Thinking. Gray retired in 2009, but worked on publications until 2020. He passed away at the age of 81.

Rolando Teruel (1974 – August 2023)



Rolando Teruel was a Cuban arachnologist who specialised in scorpions, schizomids, amblypygids, and solifuges. In the words of Danni Sherwood, Rolando was “an author of hundreds of papers and serving as an editor on the board of various journals, he distinguished himself as a multi-

order specialist and produced a high output of excellent quality work throughout his career. He has left us too soon and his loss leaves a giant hole in our field”.

Vito Zingerle (14 June 1970 – 7 August 2023)



Christian Komposch provided the following summary of the Italian arachnologist:

“Vito Zingerle studied biology in Innsbruck, then completed his studies in zoology and ecology at the

University of Innsbruck. His dissertation was about the harvestmen and spider fauna of the Dolomites; he received his doctorate in 1999 with Konrad Thaler. Two years later, the native South Tyrolean took over the coordination of the Natural History Museum in Bolzano, which he headed as director from 2005 to 2017. Vito Zingerle has been Director of the State Department for Innovation, Research, University and Museums since autumn 2017.”

Brown widows threatening US urban black widow population

In a recent study², researchers found that the invasive brown widows (*Latrodectus geometricus*) in the USA prefer to kill and feed on southern black widows (*L. mactans*) over other spider species. The researchers placed *L. geometricus* with one of three species whose distribution overlaps with *L. geometricus*, namely *L. mactans*, red house spiders (*Nesticodes rufipes*) and triangulate cobweb spiders (*Steatoda triangulosa*). The researchers found that *L. geometricus* is six times more likely to kill and feed on *L. mactans* than the other species, and three times more likely to peacefully cohabitate with the other species than *L. mactans*. The researchers also found that *L. geometricus* has twice the fertility potential as *L. mactans* and mature much

² Coticchio, L.A., Vetter, R. & Cassill, D.L. 2023. Predation by the introduced brown widow spider (Araneae: Theridiidae) may explain local extinctions of native black widows in urban habitats. *Annals of the Entomological Society of America*, 116(3):174-183.

faster, which are other reasons they're displacing the native *Latrodectus* species.

European jays hunting purseweb spiders

Arnaud Henrard recently published his observations³ on European jays that feed on purseweb spiders (*Atypus affinis*; Atypidae) at his home in Bousval, Belgium. Purseweb spiders can live their entire life in their sock-shaped burrows, and therefore aren't really vulnerable to predation. In the paper, Arnaud explains how the birds first unearth the sock-shaped tube, and then unstitch it to extract the spider. Some of his videos can be viewed on YouTube: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YaWeryGRMbs>

Taxonomic changes (Nephilidae and Zyggiella)

In a recent revision by Kutner et al. (2023)⁴, the Nephilidae family was resurrected again, which means that all the Nephilinae are once again in their own family, after having been moved to the Araneidae in 2017. In South Africa that includes the golden orb-web spiders (*Trichonephila* spp.), the African hermit spider (*Nephilingis cruentata*), and the tree orb-web spider (*Clitaetra irenae*).

Another change in the same paper that affects South Africa is the move of the missing-sector orb-web spider (*Zyggiella x-notata*) to the family Phonognathidae.

³ Henrard, A. 2023. *Don't leave your socks lying around: if the Jay sees them, you're dead meat! On the Purseweb spider (Atypus affinis Eichwald, 1830) as prey of the Eurasian jay.* Available at: https://www.researchgate.net/publication/372862410_Don't_leave_your_socks_lying_around_if_the_Jay_sees_them_you're_dead_meat_On_the_Purseweb_spider_Attypus_affinis_Eichwald_1830_as_preys_of_the_Eurasian_jay

⁴ Kuntner, M., Čandek, K., Gregorič, M., Turk, E., Hamilton, C.A., Chamberland, L., Starrett, J., Cheng, R-C, Coddington, J.A., Agnarsson, I. & Bond, J.E. 2023. Increasing information content and diagnosability in family-level classifications. *Systematic Biology*, 72(4):964-971.

New species

Taxonomists have been busy the last few months... Since the last newsletter, at least 300 new species from at least 20 new genera were described. Instead of providing a summary of each species, I'll just provide the references to some of these descriptions.

- Two new genera and three new species of wolf spiders (Lycosidae) in St Helena.⁵
- New wandering spider (*Califorctenus cacachilensis*; Ctenidae) found in Mexican cave.⁶
- New huntsman (*Sadala rauli*; Sparassidae) found in Amazon lowlands in Ecuador.⁷
- New jumping spider (*Phintella daklak*) in Vietnam.⁸
- New pseudoscorpions (*Stenohya spinata* & *S. huangi*) in China.⁹
- Revision of goblin spiders (Oonopidae) in Japan.¹⁰
- First Palaeozoic spider (*Arthrolycosa wolterbeeki*) in Germany.¹¹
- New desid (*Paracedicus turcicus*; Desidae) in Turkey.¹²

⁵ Sherwood, D., Henrard, D., Lugonov, D. & Fowler, L. 2023. Saint Helenian wolf spiders, with description of two new genera and three new species (Araneae: Lycosidae). *Arachnology*, 19(5):816-851.

⁶ Jimenez, M.L., Berrian, J.E., Polotow, D. & Palacios-Cardiel, C. 2023. Description of *Califorctenus* (Cteninae, Ctenidae, Araneae), a new spider genus from Mexico. *Zootaxa*, 4238(1). <https://doi.org/10.11646/zootaxa.4238.1.7>

⁷ Peñaherrera-R., P. & Cisneros-Heredia, D.F. 2023. A new species of spider of the genus *Sadala* Simon, 1880 (Araneae, Sparassidae) from the Yasuni Biosphere Reserve, Amazonian lowlands of Ecuador. *Ecology and Evolution*, 13(7):1-6. <https://doi.org/10.1002/ece3.10242>

⁸ Hoang, Q.D., Tran, H.P.T., Vu, T.B. & Pham, P.T. 2023. A new species and a new record of the jumping spider genus *Phintella* Strand, 1906 (Araceae: Salticidae) from the Central Highlands of Vietnam. *Bonn Zoological Bulletin*, 72(1):145-150.

⁹ Zhan, N., Feng, Z., Guo, X. & Zhang, F. 2023. Description of two *Stenohya* species from China (Pseudoscorpiones, Neobisiidae), with comments on the exaggerated sexual dimorphic pedipalp in this genus. *ZooKeys*, 1172:217-237.

¹⁰ Suzuki, Y., Hidaka, R. & Tatsuta, H. 2023. Revision of goblin spiders (Araneae: Oonopidae) in the Nansei Islands, Southwest Japan, with description of a new species. *Zootaxa*, 5323(2):216-242.

¹¹ Dunlop, J.A. 2023. The first Palaeozoic spider (Arachnida: Araneae) from Germany. *PalZ*, 97:497-504. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s12542-023-00657-7>

- Three new goblin spiders (*Trilacuna* cangshan, *T. wumashan*, *T. xiaoheishan*; Oonopidae) in Yunnan Province, China.¹³
- Three new zodariids (*Euryeidon dian*, *Mallinella banna*, *M. mengla*; Zodariidae) in China.¹⁴
- Ten new spurred orb weavers (*Microdipoena* spp.; Mysmenidae) in China, Laos, Indonesia, Georgia, and the Seychelles.¹⁵
- New pelican spider (*Eomysmauchenius* sp.; Archaeidae) from the Cretaceous period.¹⁶
- Three new wolf spiders (*Arctosa labiata*, *Pardosa altitudis*, *P. laevitarsis*) in Korea.¹⁷

¹² Gündüz, G. 2023. A new species of *Paracedicus* Fet, 1993 (Araneae, Desidae) from Turkey. *Biodiversity Data Journal*, 11:e109714.

¹³ Ma, J., Bian, D., Tong, Y., Yang, Z. & Zhang, Z. 2023. Three new species of the genus *Trilacuna* Tong & Li, 2007 (Araneae, Oonopidae) from Yunnan Province, China. *ZooKeys*, 1174:289-300.

¹⁴ Lu, Y., Li, S., Yu, H. & Yao, Z. 2023. Three new ant-eating spiders of the family Zodariidae Thorell, 1881 (Araneae, Zodariidae) from Xishuangbanna, China. *ZooKeys*, 1175:321-332.

¹⁵ Zhang, Q. & Lin, Y. 2023. Phylogenetic placement of eight poorly known spiders of *Microdipoena* (Araneae, Mysmenidae), with descriptions of five new species. *ZooKeys*, 1175:333-373.

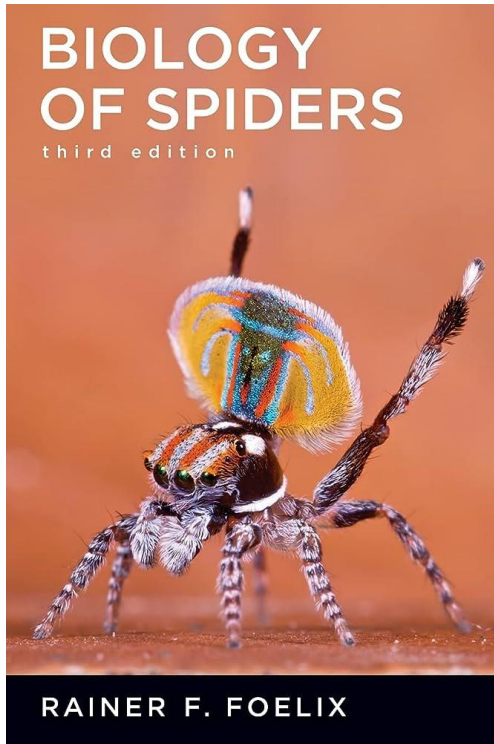
¹⁶ Peng, Y., Shi, C., Long, X., Engel, M.S. & Wang, S. 2023. Discovery of a new species of *Eomysmauchenius* from mid-Cretaceous Kachin amber (Araneae: Archaeidae). *Cretaceous Research*, 2023:105703. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.cretres.2023.105703>

¹⁷ Jang, C.M., Bae, Y.S., Yoo, J.S., Lee, S.Y. & Kim, S.T. 2023. Three new records of wolf spiders (Araneae: Lycosidae) from Korea. *Journal of Species Research*, 12(3):224-228. doi:10.12651/JSR.2023.12.3.224

Book review

Biology of Spiders – Rainer F. Foelix

by Anka Eichhoff



Author: Rainer F. Foelix

Publisher: Oxford University Press

Format: Paperback

Price: ± R1 300 to R1 600

Pages: 336

ISBN: 9780195095937

Available at: Amazon

Contents in chapters:

Characteristics of spiders

Functional physiology

Metabolic characteristics

Neurobiology

Spiderwebs

Locomotion and prey capture

Reproduction and development

Ecology

Systematics and stem history

If you read this newsletter and this review, you are one of the spider enthusiasts who want to know more about spiders than only their names. In this case, this book is just the right one for you! It will teach you about spiders' behaviour, their mating behaviour, their morphology, their neurobiology, silk, webs, venom, and basically anything you want to know about spiders.

Every chapter leads from the greater connection to interestingly explained details illustrated by many outstanding black-and-white photographs and hand-drawn diagrams.

This third edition contains 500 more references than the second edition, with research up to 2015, and also contains a section dedicated to tarantulas.

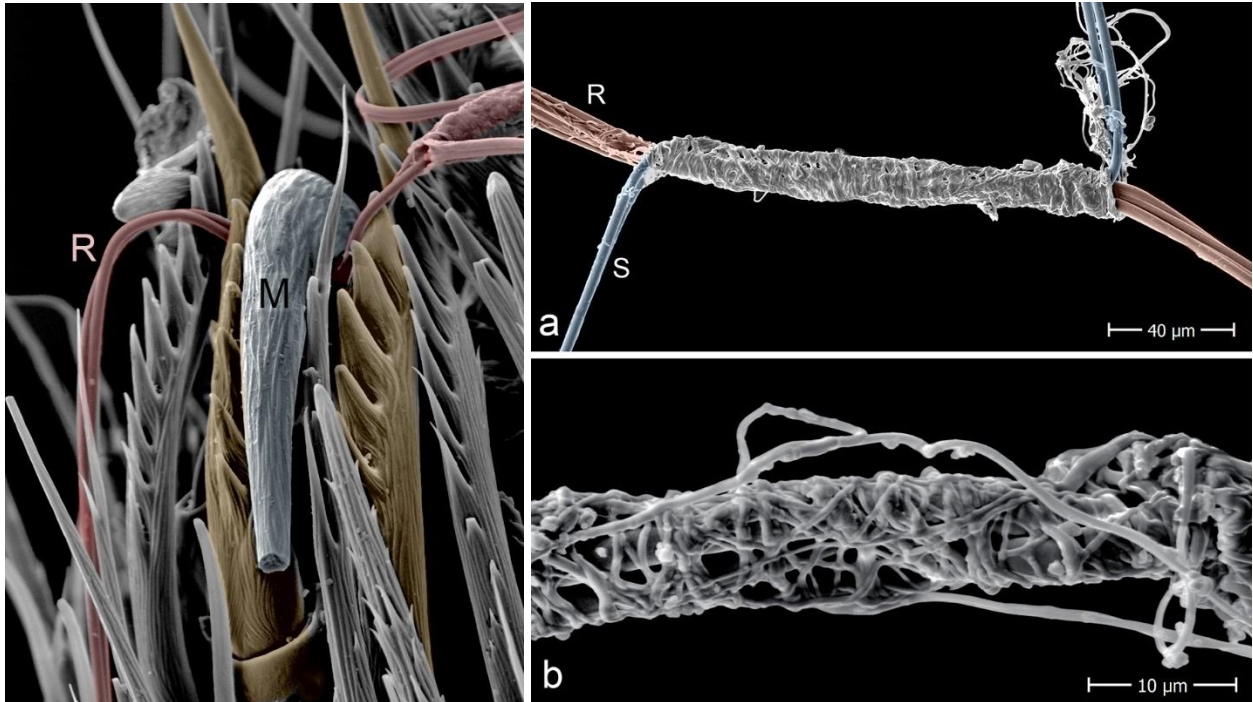
My personal opinion is that *Biology of Spiders* is A MUST for every serious spider enthusiast! This includes the layman who wants to learn more about spiders, up to seasoned arachnologists and biologists. The book is well structured and written in clear and comprehensive language (even for non-scientists); it awakes the curiosity in terms of more information while reading.

It is available in English and German. Since I have this book at hand, I use it daily: look up, reread, and enjoy! A new edition is planned for 2024 in collaboration with David Hill (arachnologist specialising in Salticidae) with additional references (literature up to 2023 included) and the pictures will be in colour.

Observations

Cyrtophora silk

These SEM photographs of the claw of *Cyrtophora*, and silk threads of the orb-web were taken by Rainer Foelix from Germany. The first photo shows how the silk thread (R) is held between the middle claw (M) and the serrated accessory setae. The second photo shows how the spiral threads and radial threads are joined by an additional layer of silk over some distance.



Double trapdoor

This photo of a double trapdoor was recently uploaded to iNaturalist. Unfortunately I can't remember who the observer was. It would be interesting to know if both trapdoors were in use.





Uloborid egg sacs

Hugh Heman from the USA posted this hackled orb-web spider (Uloboridae) with a string of egg sacs. While it's not a Southern African spider, it's worth posting here to find out if anyone here has seen an uloborid string like this, which actually resembles the tropical tent-web spider's (*Cyrtophora citricola*) of stringing their egg sacs together.

Rain spider drinking coffee

Janet Lindup Longman from Betty's Bay posted this photo of a rain spider (*Palystes superciliosus*) drinking her coffee. This photo resulted in almost 4 000 shares, and quite a few memes.



This is why *Palystes* spp. are sometimes called "lizard-eating spiders"

A common rain spider (*Palystes superciliosus*) with a common dwarf gecko (*Lygodactylus capensis*). Photographed by Laetitia Bull in White River, Mpumalanga.

Dune spiders

Cecile Roux photographed a ground spider (*Asemesthes* sp.; Gnaphosidae) running accross the sand and then hiding under a silk flap covered with sand. She also photographed a wolf spider in its sand-and-shell retreat. Both these spiders are included in her article on spiders of the West Coast (see page 38).



Cecile Roux found this spider retreat in Garries, Northern Cape, and tried to find out who the owner was. The photo is unclear, but it might be an orb-web spider (Araneidae) of sorts, but it's not clear if it created the retreat. Perhaps it just occupied it.



EVENTS

Spider identification course:

ARC, Roodeplaat – 13 August 2023

by Kira Bower



Some attendees at the spider ID course at the ARC at Roodeplaat. Photo: Caren Neal.

I'm someone who struggles with a fear of spiders, so I wanted to attend the Spider Identification Course as a way to begin to overcome my fear. I had such a good time. It was quite educational and enjoyable to see the collection maintained by the ARC and how the collection manager works to maintain it. I also really liked learning a bit about the taxonomy of the different spider families. Looking at the different specimens under the microscope was fascinating and opened up a whole new world of awareness for me. I was geeking out the whole time. Another important thing I noted was that being able to see the samples in real life allowed me to put their sizes into perspective, which also helps me manage what I know is an irrational fear. The presenters' enthusiasm and passion for the subject matter were obvious and infectious, and I'd definitely recommend this course to anyone interested in learning about spiders, for whatever reason.



Photos 1 & 2: Kira Bower. Photos 3 & 4: Caren Neal. Photos 5 & 6: Astri Leroy.

Spider presentation:

Bloemfontein – 30 August 2023

by Christil Viljoen



Rudi Steenkamp (left) and Ruan Booysen, the two presenters from the Spider Club of Southern Africa. Photo: Natasja Lutjens.



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We at VetHealth Animal Clinic are always trying to host interesting talks about animal-related subjects, but usually it's more in the line of first aid or vaccinations. We were asked if we could host a snake talk a while ago since we help snake catchers with injured snakes. After a huge success, our receptionist asked if she could contact the Spider Club of Southern Africa for a spider talk.

Initially we weren't sure if people would even be interested, as most people just care about what insecticide is most efficient when it comes to these misunderstood creatures. However, we were wowed with the number of people who showed up; we hosted 86 people.

The spider talk has been our most successful informative talk to date; we didn't even have enough chairs and ended up carrying our couches outside. The talk presented by Rudi and Ruan was extremely informative when it came to all the different species we get in Southern Africa, spider bites, and the history of the Spider Club, and even featured some live spiders for some to face their fears face to face.

Some of the highlights were the Witsand white lady spider, which none of us have ever seen, learning about the long lifespan of some spiders, how their eyes work, that some spiders, like jumping spiders, show intelligence, and how diverse they are as a species.

We've received amazing feedback on the talk, praising Rudi and Ruan for their passion and knowledge of spiders and thinking twice before getting the Doom out. You never know if there's a future arachnologist in the crowd or at least someone who will start relocating them instead of killing them.

We encourage people who want to host informative talks about animal-related topics in Bloemfontein to please contact VetHealth Animal Clinic; we really want to create awareness of the animals in South Africa, especially the misunderstood ones like spiders. We are aiming to hold a bat talk in the near future, so keep your eyes peeled on our Facebook page! Thank you again to Rudi and Ruan for the talk, Melvin Gouws for the sound, Nadia McCrindle for the extra chairs and projector, and the VetHealth team for this successful event.

Gauteng Spider Walk:

Groenkloof Nature Reserve – 17 September 2023



Attendees at the spider walk in Groenkloof Nature Reserve, which was the first spider walk of the season. Photo: Michael Swart.

Two things always stand out for me on Spider Walks: Watching how initial apprehension and fear in some turns into fascination and wonder and how enthusiastic the little ones are to soak up the knowledge shared by our experts. Thank you Spider Club group leaders, you are all awesome!

- Lorinda Stoltz -



One of very few areas in South Africa that houses the very rare cave violin spider (*Loxosceles speluncarum*). Photos: Garrie Wright.



On the left, part of the current Spider Club team, from left to right: Astri Leroy, Garrie Wright, Henning Boshoff, Caren Neal, Jarrod Todd, and Deoné Röhrbeck (photo by Michael Swart). On the right, the future Spider Club team... Paul van der Walt and his children, together with Caren Neal's son and daughter (photo by Garrie Wright).

The reason I enjoy going on these hikes is the knowledge base around it. Even though the main intent is to find spiders and learn about them, we don't just focus all our attention on them. We show our appreciation towards all the different kinds of specimens we find along the trail by stopping and taking the time to talk about the wonderful finds. Sometimes we would get a little carried away and deviate from one specimen to another because of how excited we get. A perfect example was when we were talking about the blind snake. We then got talking about how earthworms are hermaphrodites, and then we jumped onto the topic of how some female scorpions don't need a male to reproduce. If a female scorpion wants to have offspring, she has the power to reproduce just by cloning herself.

Also, another interesting thing I had the privilege of learning was that some female spiders sacrifice themselves as food for another spider's offspring – this is the ultimate form of the ecosystem, as the female spider has already completed her lifespan and will serve no other purpose than to die, sadly.

We can't forget coming into contact with the Gauteng cave violin spider. My mind was blown by the way Jarrod handled it. I understand that this spider is classified as one to look out for, but if I am being completely honest, I was more afraid of the wasps in the cave than the spider.

I enjoy these walks because I also feel like I am in a safe space, and there is no judgement because there are no such things as "stupid" questions. Everyone is so friendly, and all they want to do is share their knowledge and educate, and they do it in such a way that they give the scientific name, followed up by their common name as it's easier to remember.

- Shannon Momsen -



After the spiders have been collected, it's time for the macro photographers (left: Kyle Thomas; right: Jarrod Todd) to show people how beautiful these small creatures are. Photo: Garrie Wright.

I had done the Spider Identification Course (which is really good in its own right, since we get to see the different features of different taxonomic groups and then look at specimens under the microscope) and so I really wanted to be able to apply the theoretical knowledge that I had learned into the practical, so the spider walk was perfect.

I really appreciated Jarrod's passion for all things arachnid – he really can't hide it – and at the same time, his ability to create a structure for the walk and give important information about how to remain safe yet indulge our sense of curiosity and appreciate these fascinating creatures in their own environments and as important parts of our ecosystem.

The high points for me were getting to meet one or two of the faces from the Facebook group (Hi Henning! 😊) as well as other new faces (for me as a newbie), seeing how gently one should handle these spiders, and most of all I was amazed at how gentle the violin spider was, and how much education helps to dispel irrational fears. Such an amazing experience; I'm ever so grateful.

- Kira Bower -

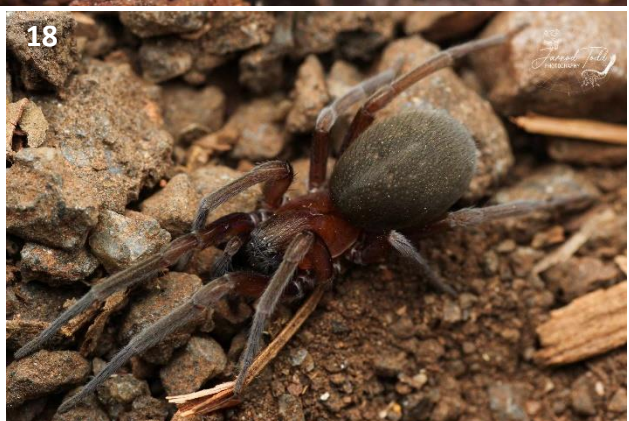
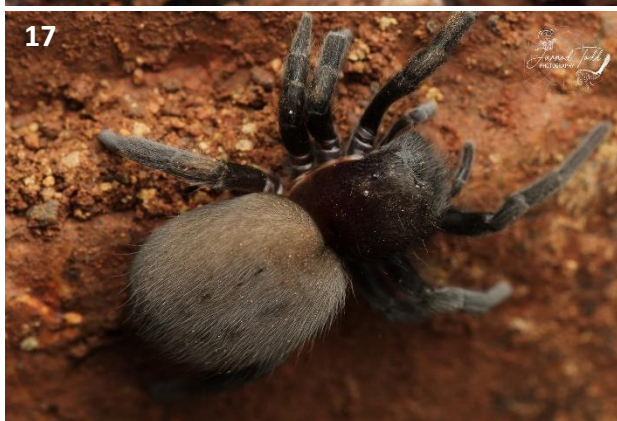
Photos



1 & 2: Gauteng cave violin spider (*Loxosceles speluncarum*; Sicariidae). **3:** Eight-eyed orange lungless spider (*Caponia* sp.; Caponiidae). **4:** Ground sac spider (*Afroceto* sp.; Trachelidae). **5:** Grass funnel-web spider (Agelenidae). Photos: Jarrod Todd.



6: *Pellenes tharinae* (Salticidae). 7: *Rhene* sp. (Salticidae) 8 & 9: *Tusitala* or *Evarcha* maybe? (Salticidae). 10 & 11: Palp-footed spider (*Palpimanus* sp.; Palpimanidae). 12 & 13: Burrowing wolf spider (*Hogna* sp.; Lycosidae). Photos: Jarrod Todd.



14 & 15: Feather-legged lace weaver (*Uloborus plumipes*; Uloboridae). **16:** Ground crab spider (*Xysticus* sp.; Thomisidae). **17:** Ground velvet spider (*Dresserus* sp.; Eresidae). **18:** Hackled mesh-web spider (Phyxelididae). Photos: Jarrod Todd.

Spider Tales 4:

The stuff of (urban) legends: Dissecting three widespread spider myths

by Benjamin Carbuccia

The following blog article was taken directly from Benjamin Carbuccia's "Nopeland Discovery" blog, which can be viewed here: <https://nopelanddiscoveryblog.blogspot.com/>

From Benjamin: **Except when the source is explicitly cited, the images illustrating this blog are mine and are not free to use without permission.**

References are integrated in the text of the article; the words [in blue](#) are clickable and will redirect you to the sources of the information.

Urban legends are fascinating. These pieces of modern folklore are as creepy as they are entertaining, and provide a wonderful insight into how entirely made-up, far-fetched stories, can be believed and passed on, as long as they sound scary and shocking enough. Of course, they are often told for fun and entertainment, but there are also many people who sincerely believe in some of them and accept them as fact.

A big part of their efficiency comes from their tendency to tap into the widespread fears and beliefs of the place and time they exist in. These cultural context elements, which give birth to the urban tales and transpire through them, can be highly specific to one particular location (such as a [particularly creepy and mysterious abandoned building](#) in a specific town) or be more vague, and representative of the concerns and anxieties of an entire demographic. The fear of all things foreign and unfamiliar, and of these foreign threats making an unwelcome intrusion in our world of familiarity and perceived safety, for instance, is a recurring theme in urban legends, particularly those that arose in times of international tensions such as the Cold War in the 1960s and 70s, or the [conflicts in Iraq in the early 2000s](#).

Quite frequently, the "foreign threat" in question is a venomous or dangerous animal (or at least, [depicted as such](#) in the tale), and, more often than not, a spider (although the bestiary of urban legends also includes rats, scorpions, snakes and even alligators!).

From our human perspective, which tends to see human and mammalian traits as "normal", and anything that deviates from this "norm" as "weird", spiders are extremely strange, and their behaviours and abilities seem almost alien-like. At the same time, they're also among our most common and conspicuous commensals (wild species that live alongside us and share our habitats); there's no place, anywhere on the planet, that is permanently inhabited by humans but not by spiders. Thus, they perfectly embody the intrusion of the wild, foreign, "alien" element in our familiar and "safe" universe. No wonder they are so often featured in urban legends: unfortunately for them, they have exactly the right profile.



Familiar, but at the same time wild, strange and shrouded in mystery, spiders occupy a very special place in modern folklore



Since the early days of cinema, spiders have been often picked as horrific antagonists or intimidating decor elements, but very rarely as anything else ([image source](#))

In addition to that (and probably partly because of it), spiders are the object of a fairly common phobia (although [far less common](#) than one would think) and, more importantly, of a widespread and normalised mindset of hate, fear and disgust, [largely fed and encouraged by media](#) and cultural products, from films to internet memes.

In terms of reputation compared to their actual medical significance, spiders are probably the most exaggeratedly maligned and misunderstood animals on earth, possibly even more so than snakes or sharks. Any news about spiders, even good ones such as [a threatened species making a comeback](#) or research highlighting [how precious and helpful they are to ecosystems and agriculture](#), are depicted by the media in an [invariably negative](#), generally distorted and sometimes [downright ridiculous](#) way.



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2022 gets even worse



INDY100.COM

Hand-sized spiders that can walk on water are spreading across UK

The actual news behind this title? A rare and threatened (and fairly large, but not nearly "hand-sized") species (*Dolomedes plantarius*) whose populations are finally on the rise in some protected areas in the UK, thanks to conservation efforts. "Fact distortion" is quite an understatement here.

Unfortunately, this trend is not restricted to [lowly tabloids](#) selling fear as a cheap way to bait readers; even [wildlife documentaries](#) and [animal show hosts](#) indulge way too often in sensationalism and exaggeration when talking about spiders. [Misinformation is such a standard](#) when it comes to these animals that it has made us extremely gullible about them, and about what they can or cannot do. While urban legends about holes leading to hell, giant prehistoric sharks hiding in the Mariana Trench, or vengeful ghosts appearing in mirrors understandably raise some eyebrows, the three spider tales that follow, although entirely fictitious and not much less far-fetched, are frequently accepted as facts by people who sincerely believe in them.

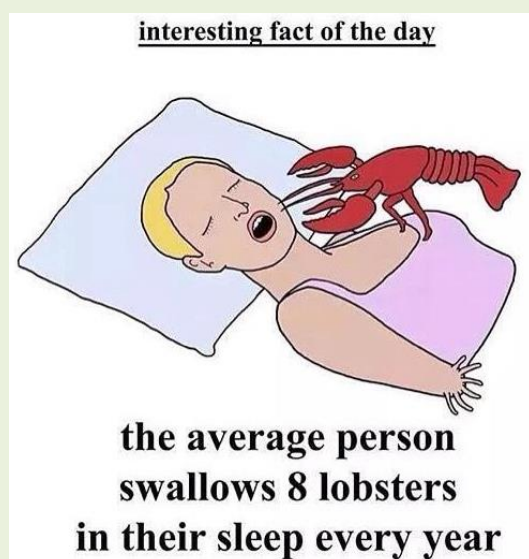
These tales are worth dissecting, because there is often a distorted truth behind them. Although the stories are 100% fictional, the human imagination is much more limited than we give it credit for, so they are often based, or at least distantly inspired, by actual phenomena. The good news is, the kernel of reality they hide is always much more reassuring and mundane than the myth.

1. The spiders in the mouth

This one is more of a factoid¹ than an actual urban legend: according to the Internet, spiders sometimes enter a sleeper's open mouth, and the average human swallows about eight spiders a year (some variations say eight in our lifetime, some say up to 50 in a year, but the truth is, you can eat as many as you want, no one will check) in their sleep.

Apparently, this myth has been circulating at least since the 1970s, but its popularity really took off when it started spreading on the Internet. While its origin and early spread through oral transmission is difficult, if not impossible, to dig up, its second life online is much easier to trace. The first recorded instance of the factoid¹ on the Internet is from the famous fact-checking website [Snopes.com](https://snopes.com), in 2001. Ironically, the first known online occurrence of this myth is therefore [an article debunking it](#), which claims its original source was an article about online misinformation, written by Lisa Birgit Holst, published in 1993 in the journal *PC Professional*. The factoid¹ was allegedly mentioned by Lisa Holst as a social experiment, and originally taken from Lucy Clausen's book, *Insect Fact and Folklore*, published in 1954.

The thing is, upon closer investigation, there is no trace of Lisa Holst's article anywhere, or of the journal *PC Professional*, or even of Lisa Birgit Holst herself. There is no mention, either, of that factoid¹ in *Insect fact and folklore*, which [does not contain any information](#) about spiders, except in the introduction, to say that they are not insects. If you try to look up Lisa Birgit Holst or her article on Google, you'll find [a disclaimer](#) from Snopes confirming that the article was actually a joke and a social experiment, with a fabricated factoid¹ and made-up sources, and that "Lisa Birgit Holst" is an anagram for "this is a big troll". The entire thing was meant to encourage people to be careful about what they read on the Internet, and not only to check the validity of the information, but also its sources. Needless to say, it backfired spectacularly.



That factoid became so famous on the Internet that it has inspired an endless supply of sarcastic, absurd memes and jokes (artist: [Chris \(Simpsons artist\)](#))

That little piece of Internet folklore is very interesting, because it provides great insight into how an untrue, and honestly not very believable, piece of false information can be shared to such an extent that basically anyone who had an Internet connection in the 2000s and 2010s has heard about it. It shows that as long as a factoid¹ is striking and surprising, it doesn't have to sound too realistic to spread efficiently. It's unlikely that many of the people who shared it actually believed in it, or had even thought it through; however, it's such a perfect attention-grabbing "fun fact" that even those who didn't really swallow it (pun intended) still passed it on.

The common "explanation" for that myth is that spiders mistake the human mouth for a source of fresh water, and enter it to drink saliva. The thing is, a sleeper's saliva isn't exactly *clean, fresh* water. It's a lukewarm, sticky, stinky mix of water, salt, enzymes, degraded food scraps, and bacteria ([many more than when we're awake](#)).

While we sleep, our production of saliva [drops considerably](#), resulting not only in smaller, more concentrated amounts, but also in a dirtier, stinkier mouth, because of bacterial build-up. Meanwhile, spiders are incredibly sensitive creatures, [whose legs and pedipalps are covered with receptors](#), including

mecanoreceptors that detect vibrations and air currents, and chemoreceptors that "smell" and "taste" what they touch. A spider walking on a sleeping human is capable of identifying that this large, warm, salty, sour thing that moves and vibrates is alive, enormous, and thus potentially dangerous and best avoided. Although spiders can sometimes find themselves walking on us by accident, they will generally try to get down and away as soon as possible. Seen with a spider's senses, a sleeper's open mouth is a huge, wet, abnormally warm hole, dripping with salty, sticky fluids and exhaling a strong stream of rank, hot, humid air, stinking of bacteria and decaying organic matter. Not exactly a safe and inviting hideout. Spiders haven't survived for [more than 300 million years](#) by randomly entering potential predators' mouths to their certain death.

Finally, let's consider one last ridiculous point: how exactly would we have discovered that we eat *on average* eight spiders in our sleep in a year? It's supposed to happen *while we sleep*, and therefore unbeknownst to us. It's not like there is a statistically significant number of people out there who agreed to get filmed while sleeping every night for a year or even *for their entire life* to see if a spider crawls into their mouth, and how often it happens...



If a spider ever entered your mouth, it probably looked like that.



Maybe that's how we know (artist: [MyGumsAreBleeding](#))

There's one way you *may* have accidentally swallowed a spider before; however, you were not asleep. Tiny spiders, and spiderlings (babies) of larger species, can travel very long distances by soaring through the air, using strands of silk as a para-sail, taking off thanks to atmospheric electrical charges and ascending air currents. That passive flight, called ballooning, can carry the spiders over hundreds, sometimes thousands, of kilometres.



The tiny "money spiders" (family Linyphiidae) are ballooning specialists, and keep doing it as adults; this behaviour inspired a belief that they'll bring fortune to those they land onto, hence their name

The thing is, ballooning spiders can't really control their route, and behave like "aerial plankton", carried by the winds; that means their flight could, unfortunately, drive them right to a gruesome death, inhaled by a mouth or a nostril. The good news is, only tiny spiders can balloon, so if it ever happens (or happened) to you, you probably won't even realise it; you'll just think you swallowed a midge or another tiny insect.

2. The exploding cactus

As [the tale](#) goes, someone (in almost all versions, a woman, for some reason) brought back a rare cactus (or a yucca, depending on the versions) from some foreign place (most of the time, it's [Mexico, southwestern USA](#), or another country in arid parts of the American continent, but there are many versions of the story, including [a British one](#) where the plant was simply bought at Marks & Spencer's, or [Ikea](#)) to their home.

A few days later, as the person is watering or misting the plant, they notice that it seems to react oddly, generally by faint movements or sounds (depending on the versions, it vibrates, shivers, or looks and/or sounds like it's breathing). Intrigued, they call a knowledgeable authority (some kind of plant expert, or, in other versions, a friend, a neighbour, or the police) and ask if that kind of reaction is normal for that plant species. Instead of providing a calm, informative and botanical explanation, the expert tells the main protagonist to get out of the house immediately and lock all doors and windows. While, or right after they do, the plant suddenly explodes as thousands of tarantulas, which hatched from eggs laid inside its trunk, burst out and invade the house. In most versions, the expert alerted by the main protagonist immediately made a call to some authorities (the police, the firefighters or the Agricultural Department), and while the explosion happens, an intervention unit in Hazmat suits raids the house and immediately destroys the deadly spiders.

There's another version with an identical storyline, but which features scorpions instead of tarantulas. Of course, there are more gruesome variations of the tale, where there's no call and no intervention, or where one of the family members is too slow to get out of the house, and gets bitten to death (or to amputation) by the spiders. There's even one where the tarantulas devour the family dog, who was left behind!

This tale is fairly old, dating back at least to the early 1970s, hence its many variations. Its origin is fairly difficult to trace (probably in North America), as in the last 50 years, it has popped up in various places in North America, [many European countries](#), Australia, and probably elsewhere. Because of its longevity, it has been [abundantly and repeatedly debunked](#). It's a textbook example of the "foreign invasion" trope which is so common in urban legends, particularly those born during the Cold War. Like the similar "[Mexican pet](#)" story, where a woman brings back from Mexico an "adorable chihuahua" which turns out to be an aggressive, oversized sewer rat, this legend is primarily meant to be a cautionary tale.

While most messages that could be taken from these tales are laced with xenophobia and sexism (as the kind-hearted but clueless person who unwittingly takes the "big bad dirty foreign threat" back to the "safe, sanitary, civilised homeland", eventually putting lives in danger, is, of course, always a woman), there's one that is worth remembering: don't randomly poach wild plants and animals from their natural habitat to bring them back home. Not only is this a highly unethical practice that can threaten wild populations of the species and/or cause it to become invasive elsewhere, but it could also land you in big trouble, if that species happened to be a protected one, or if you crossed a border with very strict regulations regarding the trade of wild species.



Animals get more attention, but most invasive species, including many of the most problematic, are plants. In some cases, the invasion started with people treating the plant like a harmless, decorative commodity, and bringing it back home just because it looks pretty.

However, that trouble would not be of the "eight-legged freaks" kind. That entire "plant spewing venomous arachnids everywhere" is poppycock. For starters, tarantulas (family Theraphosidae) do not lay eggs inside random plants and leave. They are actually fairly dedicated mothers, which [guard and protect their egg sac](#) until the spiderlings (baby spiders) are able to fend for themselves and disperse. The same applies to scorpions: they give birth to live babies (called pulli), soft and vulnerable, which immediately crawl on their mom's back and stay there until they're big and strong enough to survive on their own. When they eventually disperse, it's slowly, by walking. Their life cycle does not involve any explosive hatching from a plant. If you happened to have a tarantula or scorpion releasing its offspring in your house, you'd just notice it by finding an unusually high (compared to the amount you normally see, which could be zero or a few, depending on where and how you live) number of babies crawling around.



Scorpions don't lay eggs inside plants; they give birth to live young, which stay on their mother's back until they're big enough to fend for themselves

The timeline is another indication that the tale is fake: both tarantulas and scorpions are long-lived, slow-growing animals. Hatching from eggs and growing to adult, or at least to substantial size, takes months or even years. Some New World tarantula species, for instance in the genus *Brachypelma* from Central America, take as much as [ten years](#) to reach maturity! Meanwhile, in the tale, a few *days* are allegedly enough for them to hatch and grow so large they make the plant burst...

Finally, the last unrealistic element is that in the story, these Mexican tarantulas are (of course) said to be extremely dangerous. However, in reality, there is no extremely dangerous tarantula species anywhere on the American continent. While some "Old World" tarantula species (from Asia, Africa and Australia) have [medically significant](#) (but not deadly) venom, "New World" species (those from the Americas) are known for the [typically milder](#) effects of their venom on humans. Of course, a bite is still

painful, but it will not be life-threatening, and [unlikely to require any medical attention](#). Actually, many tarantula species from North and Central America are immensely popular in the pet trade, as their relatively mild venom and generally passive disposition (although there are exceptions) make them suitable even for beginner keepers.



Central American tarantulas, such as this *Tliltocatl albopilosum*, are very popular as pets for their attractive colours, large size, (generally) laid-back temperament and ease of care, although they are extremely slow growers

Therefore, the deadly, cactus-exploding, dog-devouring tarantulas are, fortunately, fiction. Interestingly, though, there is a kernel of truth in that story, and it's surprisingly much bigger than in our two other urban legends: it turns out that finding exotic spiders on potted plants (but not *inside* the plant) not only happens, but is not exactly uncommon.



This little tropical spitting spider (*Scytodes* cf. *fusca*, a species originally from Central America) was found in a potted plant, bought in the UK and imported from the Netherlands.

So common, in fact, that many spider species [have extended](#), or [are extending their range](#) significantly by travelling with plants. Heated nurseries and garden centres are a true spider heaven: stable and high temperatures, high humidity, lots of hiding spots, and an abundance of insects and arachnids to prey upon, including pest species such as aphids and spider mites (their presence in the nurseries is, therefore, largely beneficial).



Probably originating from the southeast of Europe and western Asia, *Uloborus plumipes* is very common in garden centres and potted plants (so much that it is known as the "garden centre spider" in the UK) and now has an almost worldwide distribution

Their presence in nurseries causes them to often show up in homes, as they are unknowingly brought in with store-bought live plants. However, don't be afraid that your freshly bought succulent may bring in a crawling horde of giant spiders; most of these species are very small, which is why they could travel unnoticed in the first place, and are, as the vast majority of spiders is, harmless.

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<https://nopelanddiscoveryblog.blogspot.com/2023/06/spider-tales-stuff-of-urban-legends.html>

The "deadly tarantulas in the house plant" story is therefore a complete myth, and, while actual events and spiders share uncanny similarities with the legend, no one's life was in any danger in these situations.

3. The Red Spot

It's arguably the most disturbing of the three, which is probably why it is also one of the most popular and widespread, despite also being the most far-fetched.

You've heard that story before, you may have believed it, and maybe it even "happened" to one of your loved ones: someone finds a pimple on their skin, which, instead of healing over the course of a few days, gets bigger and bigger, and eventually turns out to be a spider egg mass. Depending on the (many) versions of the story, the eggs are either discovered and surgically removed on time, or hatch, the

spiders coming out in a more or less gruesome way. The [earlier versions](#) of the story take place in Europe or North America, and commonly include a "foreign threat" trope, as it is often told that the victim noticed the "pimple" after or during a trip to a tropical part of the world. More recently, the tale has travelled and globalised thanks to the Internet, and can be stumbled upon almost anywhere, often popping up in comment sections on social media.

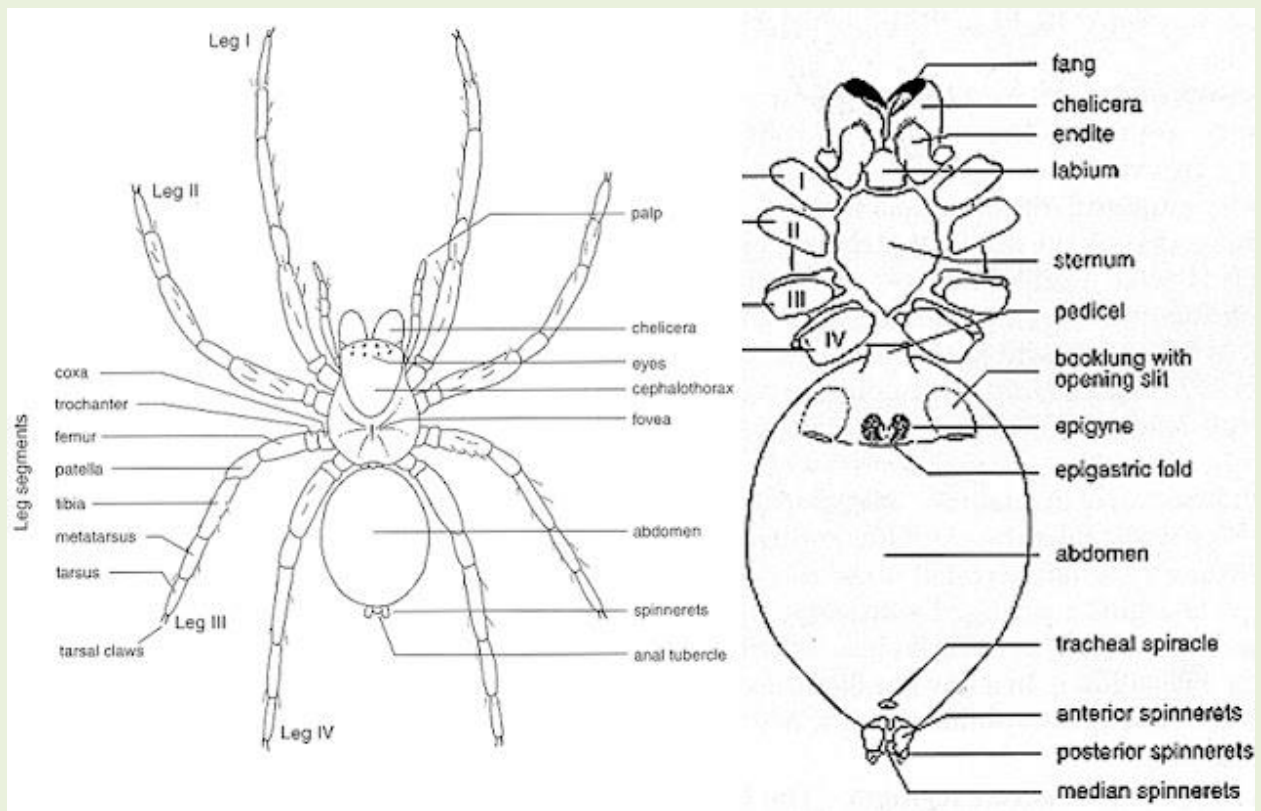
While that urban myth has been around [since at least the 1970s](#), it was brought to posterity by the writer and folklorist Jan Brunvand under the title "the Spider Bite" in his 1988 book [The Mexican Pet: More New Urban Legends and some Old Favorites](#), and to fame, under the title "The Red Spot", in 1991, by Alvin Schwartz in the third opus of his cult classic *Scary Stories to tell in the Dark* series, [Scary Stories 3: More Tales to chill your bones](#).



Stephen Gammel's wonderfully creepy illustration for Alvin Schwartz's story *The Red Spot*, in *Scary Stories 3: More Tales to Chill your Bones*.

Despite being, therefore, a fairly old and very notorious urban legend, i.e. an **entirely made-up work of fiction** whose purpose is to scare and entertain, it is still largely passed on by people who sincerely believe in it. So much, in fact, that many actually think spiders not only can, but frequently do lay eggs under human skin.

Interestingly, there is actually no trace of that phenomenon in medical manuals, and no evidence of it from any serious source, nor any convincing photograph on the Internet. There's a simple reason why: it cannot happen, not even under the most exceptional circumstances, not even in some remote corner of the Amazon rainforest. It is anatomically impossible for a spider to lay eggs *under* the surface of the skin, be it a human's or a fruit's skin (no, spiders do not lay eggs inside bananas either). Spider eggs come out of an opening placed on the ventral side of their abdomen, along a fold called the epigastric furrow. This opening, and its surroundings, are completely devoid of any piercing organ, or anything that would allow the spider to deposit its clutch inside or under a substrate (in other words, an ovipositor).



Spider eggs come out of an opening at the epigastric fold. Note the absence of anything in that area (or anywhere else) that would allow the animal to pierce a substrate and deposit its eggs in it.

Eggs are laid [as a mass](#), stuck together with a sticky substance, not one by one; and they are immediately wrapped together [in a protective egg sac made of silk](#), which is then hung onto a web, or stuck onto a hard, steady surface.

In many aspects, spiders are a hugely diverse group, but they are extremely conservative regarding the evolution of their egg-laying apparatus and behaviour: they all build egg sacs, even those that only lay one or two eggs at a time. Among the currently [51000+ described species](#), no exception is known. Even the species which do not make webs still build egg sacs for their clutches, and, because it is so widespread, egg sac production is [regarded](#) as the original use of silk in spiders.



All spiders build silken sacs for their eggs; they can be extremely simple or remarkably complex, such as the impressive cocoon of this Cape rain spider (*Palystes castaneus*)

It would also be impossible for a spider to stuff its egg mass into a wound caused by its bite; the piercing wounds left by the fangs are tiny, and even pushing a single egg into it would crush it, let alone an entire egg mass. It would not, either, be able to cut the flesh with its fangs and enlarge a wound in order to insert an egg sac: spider fangs are piercing needles, not cutting blades!

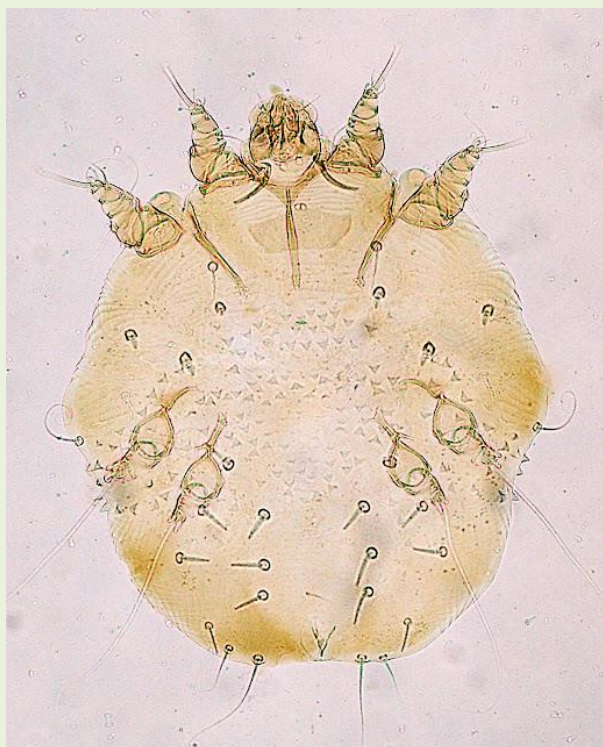
In addition to that, all known spiders [are predatory](#) or omnivorous (some [include dead invertebrates](#) and [plant matters](#) in their diet, and one species, *Bagheera kiplingi*, is even [mainly vegetarian](#)),

since their very first meal. There is no known blood-sucking or parasitic spider species, of humans or any other animal.

Of course, one can still argue that we don't know every spider species on earth and their behaviours, and that an exception could very well exist out there; and that would be a good point. However, a "spider" adapted to lay eggs under human skin would need an egg-laying apparatus and behavioural adaptations so radically different from any other spider we know, that it would either not be considered a spider, or challenge the very idea of what defines a spider, as the production of silk by the spinnerets, whose primary function is assumed to be making egg sacs, is regarded as one of their main synapomorphies (the trademark features that define the group).

More importantly, there is no valid explanation as to how and why this supposedly parasitic spider, whose existence is "attested" by countless alleged observations by laypeople, has so far managed to completely elude the attention of arachnologists, or of anyone, scientist or not, willing to rigorously document and photograph this peculiar species!

The closest thing to a spider that can lay eggs under human skin is [the scabies](#) mite, *Sarcoptes scabiei*. This microscopic mite burrows under the skin of humans and other mammals, causing itchy and distinctive rashes. Scabies is a contagious disease, which can be easily spread through close physical contact. It is quite likely that this urban legend may have been fuelled by misconceptions about the scabies mite, from medical professionals explaining what scabies is to their patients by wrongly describing it as "like a tiny spider" or "a close relative of spiders", and/or from patients misunderstanding or oversimplifying their explanations. However, *Sarcoptes scabiei* is definitely not a spider, nor is it "almost like a spider". Like spiders, it is part of the class Arachnida, but belongs in a completely different branch of the Arachnid lineage, the superorder Parasitiformes. Describing a scabies mite as "like a tiny spider" is about as accurate as describing a platypus as "like a tiny, duck-billed human"!



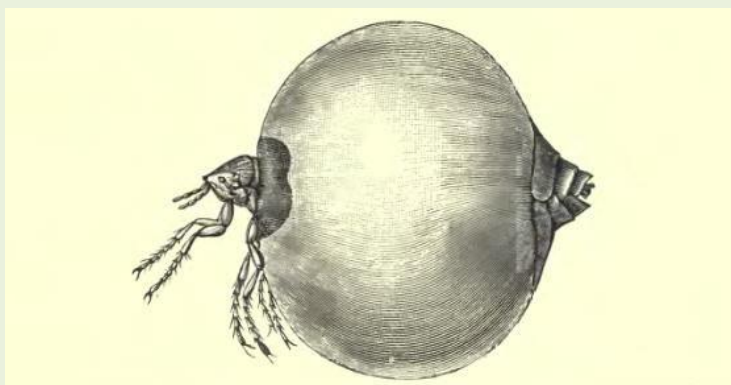
The microscopic (actual size: 0.3-0.45 mm) scabies mite, *Sarcoptes scabiei*. Note that, although distantly related to spiders, this animal is radically different from them ([image source](#))

Nonetheless, don't be too quick to assume that anyone claiming they have seen with their own eyes a doctor "pulling an egg/an egg sac from under their skin" is a liar. They may be sincere, and may have actually seen the doctor extracting *a sac-like thing full of eggs* from their skin!

What they saw, though, was not a spider egg sac at all, but an insect, more specifically a very strange species of flea, whose appearance and behaviour shows uncanny similarities with what is described in the myths: [Tunga penetrans](#), the sand flea or chigger flea. The sand flea ([not to be confused](#) with [many types](#) of unrelated [marine crustaceans](#) also improperly called "sand fleas", or with what is known as a "chigger" in North America, actually [a biting mite](#)) has a different lifestyle from its more typical cousins such as cat or dog fleas. While many types of fleas remain on the surface of their host's skin, biting from time to time to feed, *Tunga penetrans* [lies in wait in loose sandy or muddy](#)

[ground](#), for a warm-blooded animal (such as a farm animal, a wild mammal or a human) to pass by. When a suitable host comes by, the tiny (1 mm) adult fleas climb on its feet and bite, to feed on its blood. While adult males eventually return to the environment, mated females do not stop there: they latch on and claw their way in, burrowing into the skin. Because the flea is still tiny at this stage, that process is normally quite painless. After a few days of feeding continuously on their host's blood, the female flea's body swells up so much it becomes unrecognisable: the membrane in between the abdomen segments stretches and inflates, and its body turns into a huge, white, swollen sac, filled with blood and eggs. Fully engorged, the female flea is ten times larger than before feeding, its abdomen reaching a centimetre in diameter.

From the outside, an engorged female sand flea under the skin looks like an [irritated white boil with a tiny dark spot in the middle](#) (the dark spot is the terminal segments of the abdomen, which stick out of the skin and allows the flea to breathe and release its eggs). [After 8 days](#), the flea starts laying eggs, which fall off the host and drop onto the soil, where they will hatch into larvae. A female sand flea will lay about [a hundred eggs over a two-week period](#), after which



Jigger flea (*Sarcopsylla penetrans*). Female with the abdomen distended. A partially engorged sand flea, *Tunga penetrans* (under its older name, *Sarcopsylla penetrans*)

it dies and is eventually sloughed off by the host. Tungiasis (parasitic infection by *Tunga penetrans*) isn't really dangerous in itself, but the lesions caused by the fleas are [painful and prone to secondary bacterial infection](#), particularly if there are many of them. The [most common course of treatment](#) is surgical extraction of the insects with a sterile needle. Therefore, situations where people have gross sac-like things full of eggs pulled from their skin do happen. They have, however, nothing to do with spiders. Chigger fleas are found in [tropical and subtropical regions of the world](#). They are mainly prevalent in Central and South America, the Caribbean and in sub-Saharan Africa, and most commonly found around beaches, sandy riverbanks and farmland, particularly in places where farm or stray animals such as dogs, pigs or cattle are abundant. As they attack the body parts in direct contact with the ground, almost always the feet, the best way to prevent this unpleasant experience is to avoid walking in such places with bare feet.



Because of sand fleas, walking with bare feet or digging with bare hands in the sand in tropical and subtropical areas is not advised, particularly if there are lots of stray animals such as dogs or pigs around.

The sand flea has a lot in common with the fictional parasitic spider; it is more than likely that real cases of tungiasis have inspired this urban myth, either through people misinterpreting what they saw or what was explained to them by the doctors, or willingly altering the story to make it scarier, by replacing the tiny flea with a larger and more spectacular spider.

Unfortunately, when it comes to spiders, myths are more common than facts; with these three urban legends, we barely scratched the surface of the many false, often downright silly, rumours about these animals. There is more than enough material out there for another, or even ten, articles like this one. These urban legends are the perfect demonstration that what makes a false fact efficient is its ability to shock, scare and durably imprint the mind, rather than its believability. To anyone who isn't afraid of spiders, and even more to someone who knows a thing or two about them, these stories sound simply ridiculous, and obviously fake. However, to an (even mildly) arachnophobe, they are terrifying; silly or not, they'll make a nest in their mind and stay here, half-believed, feeding the fear, simply because of the "what if?" factor. That's why it is critically important to debunk these stories as often as necessary, because they don't just get spiders killed for no reason; they harm people too, and make some lives more difficult.

It's also primordial to keep in mind that [the majority](#) of what we hear and read about spiders, not just these three examples, is [complete bullshit](#). When coming across a scary spider story, one should thus always assume, unless there is factual confirmation by an arachnologist (not just any "expert"), that it never happened, or that is is, at least, wildly distorted and exaggerated.

Lingo:

Factoid: A piece of unverified (and more often than not, false) information that gets accepted and passed on as fact, simply because it is widespread and has appeared in one or several media. Recently, the term "factoid" has been incorrectly used to described "a short, interesting tidbit of true fact", but the term "factlet" should be preferred for the latter, as an important aspect of the original definition of the factoid is its untrue, or at least dubious, nature.

Example: "Oil is made from dinosaurs" is a strangely widespread, but completely false factoid. Oil (and other fossil fuels) does not come from dinosaur fossils, but from plankton deposited in low-oxygen environments (the low oxygen prevented complete degradation of organic matter, allowing it to become buried under sediment and slowly "cooked" by the pressure and heat of sedimentary rocks). The factoid [comes from the oil firm Sinclair Oil Corporation](#), whose marketing relied heavily on the image of dinosaurs (arguably more charismatic than microscopic algae) between the 1930s and the 1960s, prompting an association between fossil fuel and dinosaurs in the public's mind.

Spiders of the West Coast

All photos and text by Cecile Roux



The typical habitat around Dwarskersbos, Western Cape.

I first got to know the West Coast 30 years ago when my then fiancée took me there to meet his parents. We arrived in Laaiplek, then a quiet fishing village, in thick mist and it felt like the middle of nowhere. It took me some time to come to love the area, to appreciate the windy summers, the smell of fish meal, the sound of diesel engines as the fishing boats manoeuvred, the thick accents, and the winter fog and rain daisies. The silence hanging heavily in the salty sky.

The West Coast is changing fast now; moving with the times. The accents are disappearing, the roads are busier, there is noise and bustle, and rapidly expanding estates and development, often with little regard for the environment. But I am lucky to still go there often, and I have access to some undeveloped dune strips in Dwarskersbos, and I love visiting Rocherpan Nature Reserve when I get the chance. Looking at the dry white sand, scorching hot in summer and damp in winter, I did not expect to find much between the spiky shrubs and salt bushes when I first started looking for spiders. But I should have known better...

When I realised that there was a healthy spider community, I became curious about the coastal spiders living in close proximity to humans. The area I frequent in Dwarskersbos has mostly indigenous and waterwise gardens; there is not such a huge difference between the gardens and veld as in most other built-up areas. I wanted to see which spiders are found more frequently in these gardens and houses. The outside lights attract insects and the spiders most often found to exploit this are *Neoscona* spp. At

night, numerous large webs can be seen with these common but beautiful orb weavers. And on the frequent misty mornings, one spots all the webs missed in the dark.

As expected, brown button spiders love the shelter of the houses and fences, and can be found in many sheltered corners. I have encountered a couple of male black button spiders, most probably *Latrodectus indistinctus*. I have yet to see an elusive female in this area. *Steatoda* and *Theridion* prefer houses and gardens as well, same with the tiny red spiders believed to be undescribed members of the genus *Rubroridion*, or perhaps even a new genus. A special find for me in one garden was *Platnickina*, the only one I have ever seen. *Enoplognatha* (likely *E. mandibularis*) mostly hide under driftwood or mussel shells. I often find the very small white *Latrodectus* (for the time being, identified as the white widow – *L. pallidus*) under driftwood or flat growing vegetation on the dunes.



Theridiidae (comb-footed spiders). 1 & 2: *Latrodectus* cf. *pallidus*. 3: *Latrodectus indistinctus*. 4: cf. *Rubroridion* sp. 5: *Platnickina* sp.

The *Clubiona* spp. also prefer the gardens, as do the interesting, small *Phrynarachne*. It is interesting that the ubiquitous flower crab spiders, *Thomisus* spp., are rather scarce in this area. A notable exception is during the times that the Medusa's Head plants (*Euphorbia caput-medusae*) flower. Insects flock to these flowers, and flower crab spiders are among the many spiders enjoying the ensuing feast. There are other crab spiders that grab the attention, though. I sometimes find the fascinating *Pherecydes* with their wide eyes, and *Synema* (probably *S. marlothi*) is abundant. *Synema imitatrix* can also be seen. *Xysticus* spp. are scarce, but one of the lovely surprises was learning that the small and beautiful *Holopelus* are quite common on the dunes.



Thomisidae (crab spiders): 6: *Synema imitatrix*. 7: *Holopelus* sp. 8: *Pherecydes* sp. 9: *Phrynarachne melloleitai*. 10: *Synema* cf. *marlothi*.

I find many juvenile *Harpactira* under shrubs or debris, and the only other mygalomorph I have encountered was quite unexpected. I was sitting on the sand, observing something else when a beautiful entypesid came walking towards me. A stunning and docile spider, I don't know why she was out in the open.



Mygalomorphs. 11 & 12: *Harpactira* sp. (Theraphosidae). 13: Entypesidae.

I am happy to say that one of my favourite families, the Gnaphosidae, is well represented. *Drassodes* in their retreats under mussel shells, *Zelotes* running over the sand, *Megamyrmaekion*, the beautiful black and white *Aphantaulax*, and once a lightning-fast *Micaria*. The gnaphosid I see most often is *Asemesthes*. They prefer the flat sandy area on the dunes just beyond the beach where the vegetation is sparse. They like to make sand-covered silk retreats inside shells, but I discovered that they make these retreats in the bare sand as well. They construct a silk flap, covered with sand, over a small hollow and hide and hunt from there. I have seen them flee into these retreats when I get too close. When I gently lift the silky lid, they pull it down quite firmly. If I wait long enough, they emerge halfway, just their forelegs showing. Observing this, and having met the entypesid, I am more hesitant to venture outside the paths on the dunes – we damage so much without even realising.



Gnaphosidae (flat-bellied ground spiders). 14, 15, 17, 19: *Asemesthes* spp. 16: *Aphantaulax* sp. 18: *Drassodes/Haplodrassus* sp.

There are always many wolf spiders around. Some peeking out of the many burrows in the sand, others hunting on the sand, some constructing hides in dried-out kelp. Salticids also abound. I have found *Heliophanus* at the water's edge, hunting in the kelp and shells, in the vegetation, and on the dunes. Aelurillines are also quite common, as are *Pellenes*, *Baryphas*, and *Natta*. I am often lucky enough to spot some lovely *Rhene* as well.



Lycosidae (wolf spiders). 20-24: All unknown.

The philodromids are always a favourite and there are numerous beautiful ones to be seen. Mostly *Thanatus*, but also stunning light-grey spiders that could be *Philodromus*, and then of course the lovely orange and green undescribed philodromids (new genus) that are quite common in the area. There are some sparassids around; I would probably see a lot more of them and other spiders if I could do night walks. I have found some juveniles, and an *Arandisa*, as well as some *Parapalystes*. Along the coastal road one can see many *Stegodyphus* nests in the denser vegetation.



Philodromidae (running spiders). 25: Unknown. 26: New genus.

Scarcer finds are Amaurobiidae, Prodidomidae, *Dalmasula*, *Eresidae* and Pisauridae. Some *Ariadna* make their retreats inside dried-out kelp and shells, and the Oxyopidae and Uloboridae, which are very common only a little more inland, are conspicuous in their absence. I hope to visit a place with a slightly rockier shore and search for intertidal spiders, and also observe which other spiders prefer such a habitat.



27: *Chresiona* sp. (Amaurobiidae). 28: *Dalmasula* sp. (Oonopidae). 29: *Parapalystes* sp. (Sparassidae). 30: cf. *Arandisa* sp. (Sparassidae).

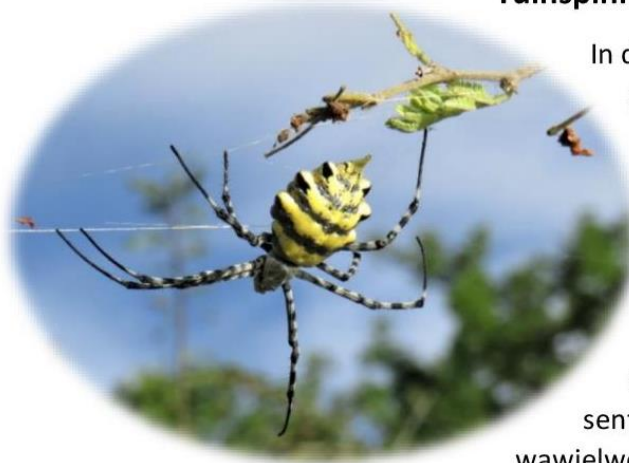
Sometimes I tend to forget that not all people have learned to appreciate spiders. I live in my happy arachnid bubble, but I do realise that not everyone knows and appreciates the small creatures like I do. I would love to create more awareness in the small villages of Dwarskersbos, Velddrif, and Laaipelek. The wonderful variety of spiders, almost all of them harmless to us, smaller than people realise, and important to the environment, are worthy of recognition and appreciation.

Anka se goggastories

deur Anka Eichhoff

Die volgende stuk is direk vanaf Anka Eichhoff se blog. Om haar stories te lees, besoek haar webwerf by <https://www.kyffhauser.co.za/Goggastories.htm>

Tuinspinnekop *Argiope australis*



In die somer, wanneer die bome, struik en grasse in volle loof staan, kan ons dikwels hierdie geel-silwer-swart spinnekoppe in die middel van hulle groot webbe sien sit. Die web is dikwels tussen twee bome/struik, maar ook tussen lang gras en draadheining of tussen die drade van 'n draadheining in 'n sonnige posisie aangebring.. Vanaf die

sentrum van die

wawielweb is daar twee tot vier sterk wit zigzag-lyne straalsgewys in die web ingewerk. Dit word die **stabilimentum** genoem. Sy doel is waarskynlik om voëls teen die barrikade te waarsku, maar daar heers nog nie volle duidelikheid oor die doel van hierdie wit “versiering” nie. Dikwels sit die spinnekop presies op die die X-vormige stabilimentum met twee paar pote saam vorentoe en twee paar agtertoe gestrek. Hierdie wit sigsaglyne het seker ook aan die spinnekop die volksnaam “writing spider” gegee.



Agter die wawielweb is 'n beskermende web-versperring aangebring, bestaande uit onreëlmatige heen-en-weer- en op-en-af-drade. Hierdie web beskerm die spinnekop teen vyande (voëls), wat geïrriteerd raak deur die sydraadversperring. Om iets/iemand af te weer, skud hulle hul web en/of hardloop uit en skuil in die plant waarteen dit opgehang is.



Wyfie van bo gesien



wyfie onderkant



baie kleiner mannetjie.....

Interessant is, dat ek al tweekeer so 'n *Argiope* mannetjie in **vreemde webbe** gesien het (ene by *Nephila senegalensis* en ene by 'n *Cyrtophora* spesie)....Swak oogsig? Kansvatter??

Tuinspinnekoppe is vir mense nie gevaarlik nie, intendeel, hulle vang baie lastige insekte. As die prooi in die web beland het, word dit met sy toegedraai,gebyt en uitgesuig.

Die tuinspinnekoppe is **dagaktief**. Hulle werk aan die web, ruil droë drade uit met kleweriges, herstel beskadigde plekke en wag vir prooi. Gewoonlik sien 'n mens hulle kop onderstebo in die web hang. Die groot spinnekoppe is die wyfies. Die dwergmannetjies lyk heeltemal anders en beweeg eerder ongesien aan die kante van die wyfie se web, verstigtig om nie gevreet te word nie.

Na paring word daar eiers in keteltromvormige eierkokonne verpak, wat dan ietwat weggesteek in die plant naby die web opgehang word.



Ander tuinspinnekoppe het soortgelyke webbe en gedrag maar ander uiterlike voorkoms.



Argiope trifasciata sien ek dikwels tussen lang biesies en vleigrasse as daar nog water in die vlei is.

Hulle silwer kleur blink in die son, dalk om insekte aan te lok.



⚡ *Argiope lobata* lyk baie soos *Argiope australis*, maar is ietwat skaarser.



Argiope tapinobata ⚡ se agterlyf is langwerpiger en smaller as die gewone *Argiope* spesies s'n. Die hele spinnekop is ook kleiner. Die punt van die agterlyf is so effens opgebui.

Algemeen kom hierdie spinnekoppe wêreldwyd voor; volgens die "World Catalogue of Spiders" is daar 87 verskillende *Argiope* spesies bekend, in suidelike Afrika 7 daarvan. In goeie reënjare sien 'n mens hulle meer dikwels as in droë jare.

Ten spyte daarvan, dat hierdie spinnekoppe regtig groot vertoon, lyf lengte van tot 30 mm, hoef 'n mens nie bang te wees nie, **ook nie vir diegene wat meer swart in die patrone op die liggaam het nie.**

Inligtingsbronne:

Spiders of the Kalahari (Ansie Dippenaar-Schoeman, Almie van den Berg)

GOGGAgids (Erik Holm, Ansie Dippenaar-Schoeman)

Spiders of the Savanna Biome (Ansie Dippenaar-Schoeman, Stefan Foord, Charles Haddad)

Spiders of the Grassland Biome (Ansie Dippenaar-Schoeman, Charles Haddad)

Teks en fotos: Anka Eichhoff

Februarie 2021

Spider of the Month

Here are the spiders of the month for July, August, and September. Members on our Facebook group nominate photos throughout the month, and at the beginning of each month, vote in a poll.

July



(1) Stumpy crab spider (*Thomisops pupa*; Thomisidae), Carol Bell. (2) Long-legged bolas spider (*Cladomelea longipes*; Araneidae), Amy Verhoeven. (3) Beetle-mimic jumping spider (*Pachyballus* sp.; Salticidae), Jarrod Todd. (4) Araniella cucumber spider (*Araniella* sp.; Araneidae), Clinton Gray. (5) Baboon spider (*Harpactira cafreriana*; Theraphosidae), Deon Paul Steenkamp.

August



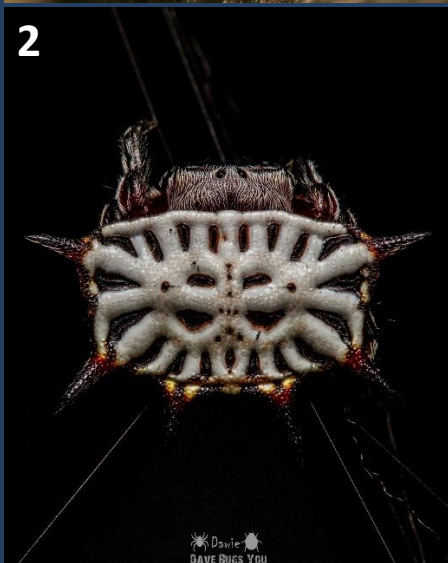
(1) White spotted firmicus crab spider (*Firmicus bragantinus*; Thomisidae) Robert Wienand. (2) Community-nest velvet spider (*Stegodyphus* sp.; Eresidae) Mike Green. (3) Elegant mexcala ant-mimic jumping spider (*Mexcala elegans*, Salticidae) Elize Vega Eveleigh. (4) False pajama spider (*Hypsosinga* sp.; Araneidae) Elize Vega Eveleigh. (5) Horned bark spider (*Caerostris sexcuspidata*; Araneidae) Elize Vega Eveleigh.

September

1



2



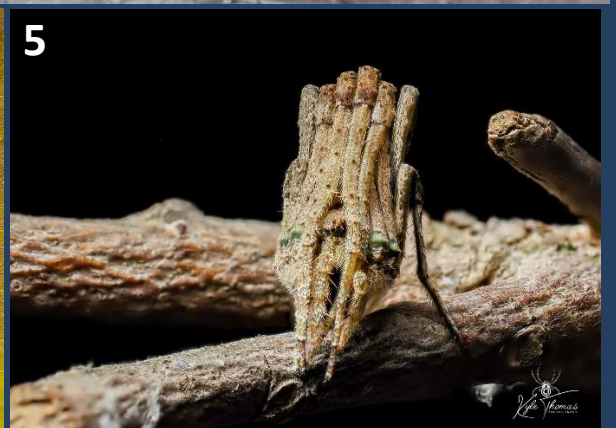
3



4



5



(1) Grass lynx spider (*Oxyopes* cf. *flavipalpis*; Oxyopidae), Robert Wienand. (2) Box kite spider (*Isoxya* sp.; Araneidae), Dawie Broekman. (3) Dark sac spider (*Copuetta magna*; Corinnidae), Adél Annandale. (4) *Micaria* ground spider (*Micaria* cf. *felix*; Ghaphosidae), Robert Wienand. (5) Twig orb-web spider (*Cyphalonotus larvatus*; Araneidae), Kyle Thomas.

Honourable Mention

These are a few spiders that didn't win Spider of the Month, but deserve to be showcased.



(1) Gordonia buckspoor spider (*Seothyra fasciata*; Eresidae), Elmar Burger. (2) Stenaelurillus jumping spider (*Stenaelurillus guttatus*; Salticidae), Elize Vega Eveleigh. (3) Pellenes jumping spider (*Pellenes epularis*; Salticidae), Robert Wienand. (4) Running spider (*Thanatus* sp.; Philodromidae) Cecile Roux. (5) Nursery-web spider (cf. *Nilus* sp.; Pisauridae), Celesté Polley. (6) Wolf spider (Lycosidae), Cecile Roux. (7) Ursa orb-web spider (*Ursa* sp.; Araneidae), Cecile Roux. (8) Tree huntsman spider (*Olios* sp.; Sparassidae), Kyle Thomas.

The wonderful world of spiders

This section showcases spiders from other parts of the world.



(1) *Actinosoma pentacanthum* (Araneidae). Photo: Rodrigo Fernández. Location: Formosa, Argentina. (2) *Araniella yaginumai* (Araneidae). Photo: Dolphin Huang Taiwan. (3) *Epicadus heterogaster* (Thomisidae). Photo: Caitlin Henderson. Location: Amazon, Ecuador. (4) *Gasteracantha westringii* (Araneidae). Photo: Gallum Munro. Location: Australia. (5) *Padillothorax* sp. (Salticidae). Photo: Yahya Aziz Negeri. Location: Sembilan, Malaysia.



(6) *Micrathena gracilis* (Araneidae). Photo: Benjamin Salb. Location: Gaithersburg, USA. (7) *Heteropoda boiei* (Sparassidae). Photo: Luke Durston. Location: Sarawak, Borneo. (8) *Gnolus blinkeni* (Araneidae). Photo: Sebastián Alexander Carrera Barrales. Location: Valdivia, Chile. (9) *Phidippus putnami* (Salticidae). Photo: 1of1Images. Location: USA. (10) *Ordgarius* sp. (Araneidae). Photo: Brendan James. Location: Australia. (11) *Ordgarius* sp. (Araneidae). Photo: Nicky Bay. Location: Borneo.

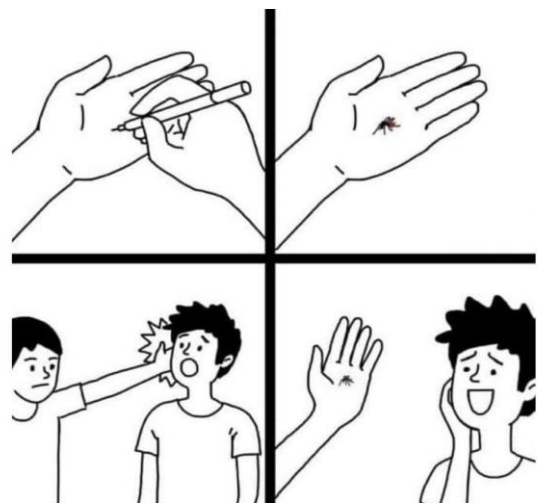


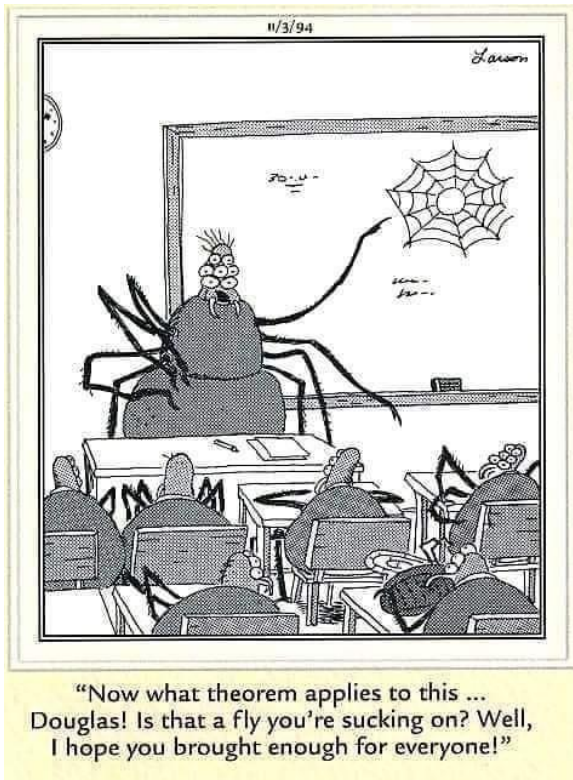
(12) *Ilargus coccineus* (Salticidae). Photo: Isaías de Lima. Location: Brazil. (13) *Rhitymna pinangensis* (Sparassidae). Photo: Peter Grob. Location: Penang island, Malaysia (14) *Meotipa* sp. (Theridiidae). Photo: Janice Ang. Location: Singapore.

On a lighter note

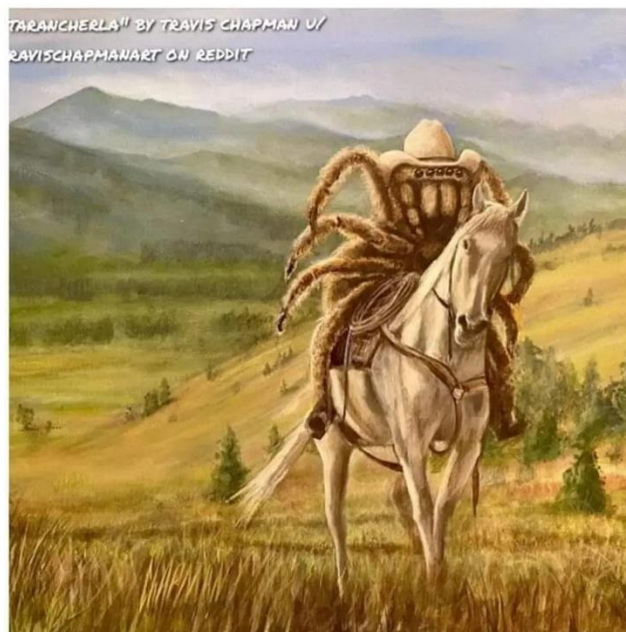


here's a little life hack 🤪



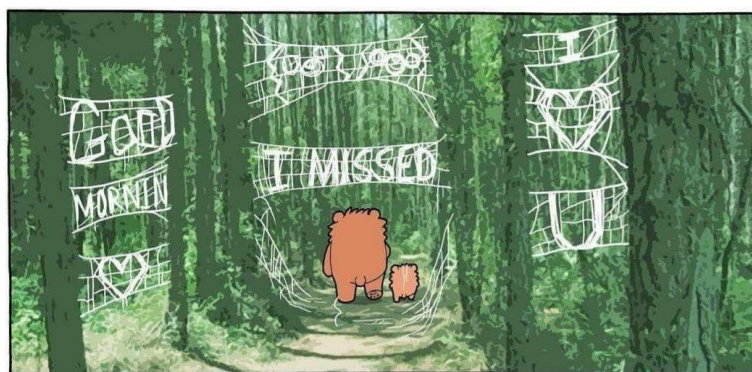
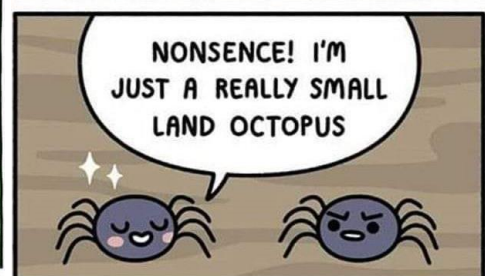
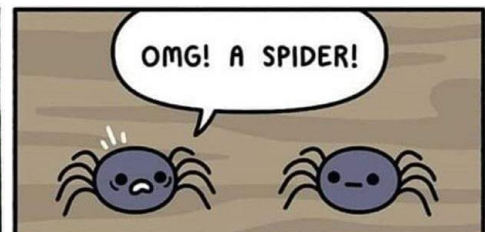


He's a Tarancherla! The fastest web slinger in the west!!



when you accidentally squash the spider when trying to catch it



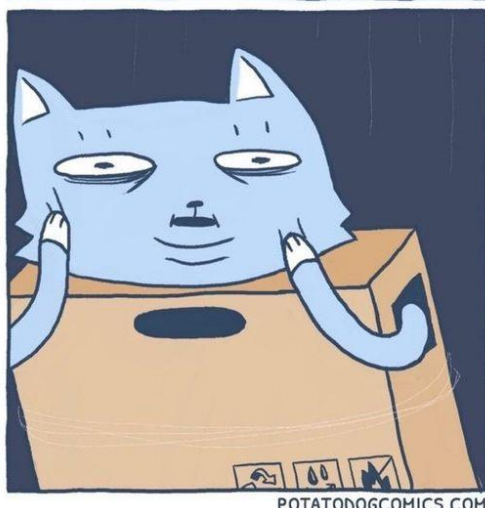


FAIRLY_DECENT_COMICS



Me: *decides to not kill the spider in my room
The spider next morning with 2 mosquitoes in its web:



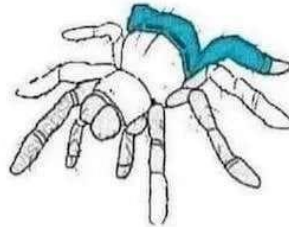


POTATODOGCOMICS.COM

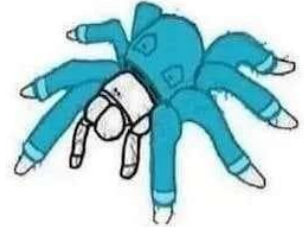


If a spider wore pants, would it wear them

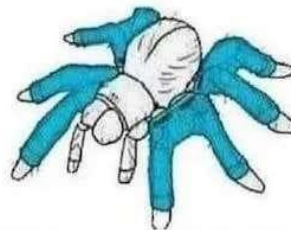
Like this



Like this



Or like this?





Araneidae



Salticidae



Argyroneta



Scytodidae



Carparachne



Mimetidae



Pisauridae

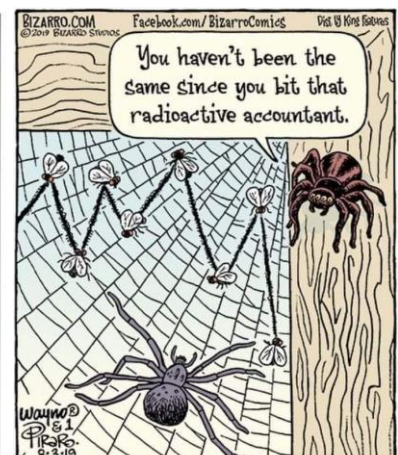


Cyrtarachinae



Ctenizidae

When your mom kills the spider in your room, but it's mosquito season



Upcoming events

DIARY: October to December 2023 www.spiderclub.co.za

A spider walk is planned for the Western Cape by Wessel Pretorius and Cecile Roux.

The Spider Club's Annual General Meeting will most likely be held in November or December, somewhere in the northern or central Free State, or possibly Gauteng. There's also the possibility that it will be held right before the AFRAS Colloquium at the ATKV Buffelspoort.

Please keep an eye on our Facebook group (<https://web.facebook.com/groups/101951926508391/>) or on our website (<https://www.spiderclub.co.za/events/category/events/>). Alternatively, register as a member of The Spider Club of Southern Africa (<https://www.spiderclub.co.za/register/>) to receive email notifications about any confirmed events.

OCTOBER

22

SPIDER WALK

Kloofendal Nature Reserve

Roodepoort, Gauteng

Come join us for a day of finding spiders (and other animals) in the 128-hectare park, which was one of the first nature reserves in Johannesburg. With a wide range of habitats, we are likely to find a wide variety of spiders. Bring your camera, as well as the necessities, like water, a hat, good hiking shoes, and, of course, your sense of adventure!

NOVEMBER

19

SPIDER WALK

Alberts Farm Conservancy

Gauteng

This 90-hectare park on the edge of Northcliff ridge is home to a variety of fauna and flora; spiders being no exception. It is the second largest park in Johannesburg, and contains wetlands, dams, a spring, and grasslands, which will offer a relaxing scenic beauty while looking for spiders.

*We charge for attendance at field and certain other events: **R100 per adult and R20 per child 11 years and under, cash only, with the option of paying R200 PER NUCLEAR FAMILY for annual subscription. Members who paid the subscription fee do not have to pay at events.** Some venues will also require an entrance fee that must be paid by each individual. For field trips we will supply vials, magnifiers, plastic pill bottles, and some other basic collecting equipment, but please bring your own if you have as well as any reference books, a picnic lunch, adequate water, a hat, and good walking shoes. **Book on info@spiderclub.co.za or 067 833 2191 or on our Facebook page.** When booking, please give us your cell phone number and we will set up a WhatsApp group for the event.*



Join our community on Facebook to meet like-minded people and stay updated on upcoming events
<https://www.facebook.com/groups/101951926508391/>

Watch this space!

Keep your eyes on your e-mail and our Facebook page as other events may be organised, sometimes at quite short notice. We will attempt to give you fair warning.