

In My Backyard

Granddaddy Longlegs

Another Creepy Spider?



When I was a teenager in Marathon long ago, my friend, Nancy McGonagill, got a summer job working for the H. E. Butt Foundation as a counselor at their girls' camp in Central Texas. As part of their curriculum, they had to make an overnight camping trip into the woods near the camp. So, along with fifty little girls and another counselor, they set out through the woods to find their camping spot, a pad of concrete large enough to hold many little sleeping bags.

When they got there, they set up camp, started a fire, roasted wieners and marshmallows and made S'mores. Long after dark they finished the last camp song and everyone headed to their sleeping bag to fall asleep under the stars.

Just before sunrise, when the sky was beginning to turn pink, Nancy said she woke up and sat up to check her girls. She was horrified to see thousands, maybe millions of Granddaddy Longlegs marching in one direction through the forest, up over the concrete slab and over the little girls in their snug sleeping bags. They were marching on her sleeping bag as well and she said it was all she could do not to scream, but she knew that would

Cellar Spider



Photo: Wikipedia: Olaf Leinlinger

A true spider, but not a Granddaddy Longlegs.

panic the little girls and all Hell would break loose! So, she just slipped back into the sleeping bag and zipped it all the way over her head and prayed for daylight.

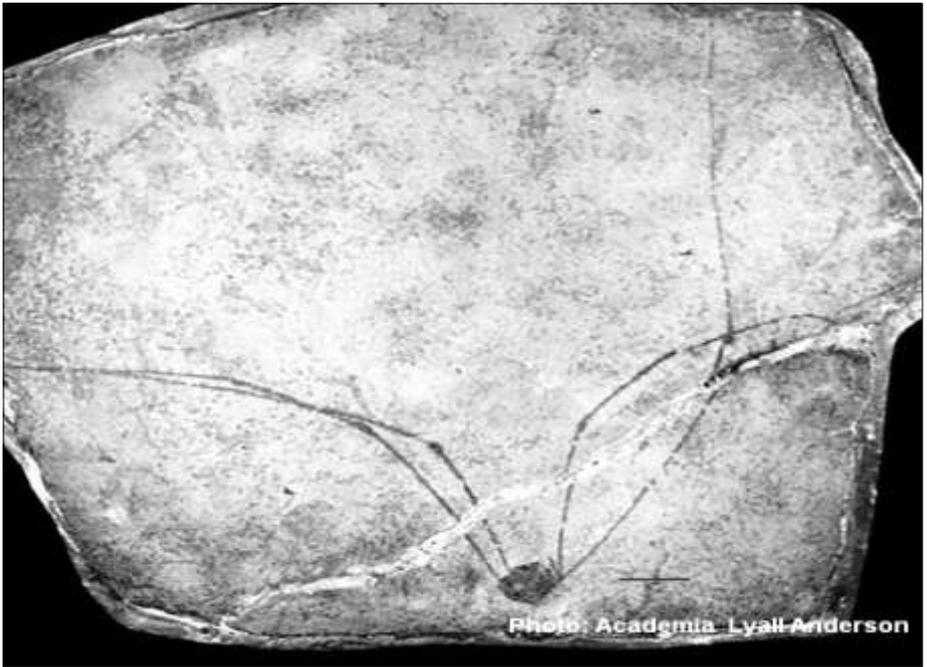
Eventually she heard the girls stirring, and since no one was screaming, she peeked out and everything was back to normal...not one Granddaddy Longlegs in sight. She never mentioned anything about it because they were scheduled for another campout before the session was over.

But, there is a secret to Granddaddy Longlegs. Though they may look scary and can frighten folks who hate spiders, the truth is, they are harmless. They have no venom, they don't have fangs, and with such tiny mouths, they can't even bite you. But those long, long legs and that tiny little body makes them very menacing. In some cases, they will vibrate or move up and down to discourage predators, and even that movement is distasteful to frightened humans.

Granddaddy Longlegs are generally brown in color and are mostly nocturnal. There are some species that live by day and those species can be brightly colored in red, black, yellow or green, with reddish or black patterns. Their body is usually $\frac{1}{4}$ " in diameter or smaller, with a leg span of up to 6", although an Asian species has a leg span of over 13".

In fact, Granddaddy Longlegs, Daddy Longlegs, or their real name, Harvestmen, are only distantly related to spiders. A key characteristic of spiders is the ability to spin silk webs. Harvestmen cannot produce silk. They are more closely related to scorpions and sun spiders than they are to spiders, so definitely, they are arachnids, which is quite a large group.

The Latin name for our Granddaddy Longlegs is *Opilones*, which translates to "shepherd." The ones who assigned this name thought the little



Fossilized Granddaddy Longlegs—unchanged in 400 million years.

harvestmen looked like European shepherds, who sometimes used stilts to check on their flocks. But, the more correct term is Harvestmen.

Researchers have discovered and named 6,500 species of Harvestmen around the world, but probably the number is closer to 10,000 actual species. There are other spiders which look like Harvestmen and can be hard to distinguish, but Harvestmen have no "waist"...their head-thorax and abdomen are one smooth, ovoid structure. True spiders have a pinched waist separating the abdomen from the head-thorax...think of black widows and you will see the difference.

One that is often mistaken for Harvestmen is the Cellar Spider, which has long legs and are very similar, except for the fused head-thorax-abdomen. Cellar Spiders also have multiple eyes, whereas Harvestmen have only one pair of eyes. Harvestmen's eyes are not capable of forming images, so the second pair of legs are modified as "feelers" to help them get around in dark environments.

Another difference is in how spiders and Harvestmen feed. Spiders turn their prey to liquid with digestive enzymes and suck it up, but Harvestmen can eat small chunks of food and digest it internally.

Another odd thing about Harvestmen is that the males have a penis, totally absent in true spiders. Spiders mate by having the male deposit sperm into the environment, which is then located and picked up by the female. The Harvestmen physically perform the act of procreation with the female, as found in higher animals. The males of some species offer a secretion or "love gift" to the female to encourage mating. When the act is complete and



Gang of Granddaddy Longlegs congregating.

the female lays the eggs and the male takes over the chore of guarding and cleaning the eggs until they hatch. The females can lay eggs almost immediately after the mating, or wait several months. And, depending on environmental conditions, the eggs may hatch in about 20 days, or several months after being laid. In some species, the female will try to eat the eggs...even more reason for the male to protect them. Some Harvestmen populations are parthenogenic, meaning there are no males and reproduction is done asexually by the female.

To protect them from predators, many species have developed tactics to discourage them. The peculiar "bobbing" movement confuses predators. They also can emit a most unpleasant smell from scent glands to discourage predators and molesters. Playing dead, attaching camouflage materials to their bodies, as well as the foul scent all help to perpetuate their species.

Harvestmen are very gregarious and can be found in huge concentrations, as my friend Nancy discovered. Groups of Harvestmen have been observed in congregations of 200 to 70,000. Large groups discourage predators and limit the chance of an individual being killed by predators.

Although spiders are totally predator/hunters, Harvestmen are omnivorous and feed on a variety of materials. Small insects and many types of plants and fungi are found in some species' diets. Others scavenge dead organisms, bird droppings and other bodily waste material. After eating, the Harvestmen will clean their legs very carefully by passing each leg through their jaws.

Finally, Harvestmen...Granddaddy Longlegs...are a very old group of arachnids, paleontologically. Although rare, their fossils have been found in strata dating back to 400 million years, virtually unchanged from modern species. They are generally not endangered, but in certain areas where man has encroached or destroyed their environment, they are dwindling in numbers. Chances are, Granddaddy Longs will be around long after we have passed from the timeline of history.

And, what's in your backyard?