

In My Backyard: Alacrán, Terror of the Desert

by C. W. (Bill) Smith

When I was a kid in Marathon I had a healthy fear of certain animals in our environment. We were indoctrinated from an early age to watch out for and destroy snakes, scorpions and centipedes, the holy trinity of evil critters. Nobody wants their kid to have an unfortunate encounter with a beastie, so it seems easier to engender fear for all creepy-crawlies. And so it was that I had the misfortune to have run-ins with all of the above mentioned creatures. As a child I came close to picking up a copperhead, not knowing that it could have had serious consequences, I have been zapped many times by scorpions, which seem to thrive at Marathon, and as an adult I was attacked by a crazed giant centipede on the job (he ran up the inside of my pants leg and raced around in the forbidden regions, but did not bite.) Ah, life in West Texas!



But one creature that still gives me the willies when I see it is what we called the Alacrán, or sun spider. Its 900+ species are found world-wide and go by a host of colorful names: camel spider, wind scorpion, scorpion carrier, jerrymunglum, jerrymander, sun scorpion, sun spider, red roman, haarskeerder (hair cutters) and baardskeerder (beard cutters.) The last names come from the giant jaws they possess with which they can shear through hair, fur and thin bones as they dismantle a small animal to eat it. In South Africa locals believe that the haarskeerders and baardskeerders trim hair and beards while the victim is sleeping for material to line their nests. The fact is there is much misinformation about sun scorpions.

Take for instance their size. Sun scorpions range from small (1/2 inch) to large (6 inches,) but wild tales brought back by our service men and women in Afghanistan and Iraq tell of giant, 12-inch spiders that chase you through the desert at up to forty miles per hour, screaming all the way!

Doctored photos on the internet have spread that claim. The classic photo is of two soldiers, one holding two spiders close to the camera, making them appear to be huge, but it is an optical illusion. Camel spiders in the desert were rumored to jump up to six feet into the air and able to leap onto camel bellies to lay their eggs. The spiders then injected the victim with anesthetic to prevent them from feeling the spider devouring them. An alternate story says that camel spiders eat the victim from the inside out, but National Geographic says it is all a hoax and flim-flam.

Yes, they are aggressive and seem to be chasing you, but in desert climates they are merely seeking to get out of the sun and are racing toward your shadow. When antagonized, they will rear up on their back three pairs of legs and raise the front legs (pedipalps) defensively, but it is all bravado and there is little danger. Like our native vinegaroons, sun spiders have no poison glands and no delivery system. The huge jaws are for biting and tearing but not for injecting with venom. The bite of a large sun spider can be painful, and sometimes secondary infection sets in, but they are basically harmless. The large jaws can also rub together to produce a rattling, grating noise, somewhat like the sound a cricket or grasshopper makes with his hind legs.

Even the term, Alacrán, is a misnomer. Alacrán, in Spanish, means scorpion, and sun scorpions are not members of the scorpion family. They are simply a branch of the spider family with an unearned reputation. Technically, they are solpugids, or solifugids, and they do have eight legs, but they are not true spiders. However, they are true nightmares. Scary in appearance and somewhat aggressive, the myth is greater than the truth.

Solpugids are seasonal creatures, prevalent during certain times of the year. The males begin to appear in spring, followed by the females in summer. By fall and winter only the young are found. They are nocturnal, "holing up" during the day and hunting by night. They are also solitary and seldom found together except when breeding.

Sex for the solpugid is a violent affair. The male deposits his contribution in the form of a "stick" which he inserts into the female's genital pore after flipping her over on her back. She will lay up to 200 eggs in burrows or crevices and may guard the eggs until they hatch. She will not feed while the eggs are incubating, so she may "bulk up" before laying the eggs by binge feeding. The young are on their own after they hatch. So much for romance!

Solpugids have engendered nightmares world-wide, and Afghanistan and Iraq are not the only places solpugids have a bad reputation. Mexico has numerous legends about the creatures, where they are known as matevenados, "deer killers," and the popular notion is that they are extremely dangerous.

So, if solpugids don't eat camels, deer or men, what do they eat? Their main diet is insects, invertebrates, and sometimes small reptiles, whatever they can catch and crush with their large jaws, before they can be crushed by the victim.

As with many of our desert creatures, the service they perform is much more important than the harm they do. They eat insect pests, are constantly on patrol at night in the spring and summer, and disappear in the fall and winter. It is better to leave them be, or move them to another location, rather than annihilating them. I vote for moving them!

And, what's in your backyard?