

In My Backyard: Scorpions!

by C. W. (Bill) Smith

I once said in this column that the unholy trinity of venomous creatures in West Texas was snakes, scorpions and centipedes. They probably cause more alarm when they blunder into our sterile and antiseptic world than anything else, mainly because they are small and can easily get into areas we consider our personal domain.

Folks who love these creatures are horrified at our irrational hate for scurrious monsters that seem to attack on a moment's notice and with little warning. But anyone who has suffered from snake bite, scorpion sting or centipede rampage over tender flesh have little sympathy for them. A well-aimed shoe or hoe or boulder dispatches the criminal trespasser and our world returns to normal. Unfortunately, most of these creatures suffer from bad PR. Their benefits far outweigh their danger, and a little care prevents a problem for both the intruder and the victim.

Scorpions certainly pack a wallop in their poison-tipped tail, but very few people die from the sting. There are some extremely dangerous scorpions, even deadly, but they don't live in our state. Of the 1,000+ species of identified scorpions in the world, only 25 can cause deadly effects. If you are allergic to bee stings and go easily into anaphylactic shock, then, yes, you might also get an allergic reaction to a scorpion sting, even the non-dangerous kinds. But that is just it, the scorpion sting is very little different from a bee sting. As someone who has been stung countless times (I'm from Marathon, after all,) I can vouch that, yes, it is painful, but after so many stings I think you build up immunity, or at least, desensitization and you get over it fairly quickly.

When I was a kid my dad always had a pile of builder's sand by the side of our house and that is where I played. On numerous occasions I would move a board or barrel and get zapped on the foot or hand by our little brown striped bark scorpion, the most prolific scorpion of Texas' 20 species. This is the one we've all seen at one time or another, with its pinkish or light tan bodies and two broad dark stripes running down the length of its abdomen and tail. Scorpions don't really have an abdomen in our sense of the word. Their head and abdomen are fused together into one unit, the cephalothorax, with a segmented tail and vicious stinger attached at its tip. The sting is fiery and may cause swelling, with the most intense reaction in the first 20 minutes. It may still be sore twenty-four hours later but usually that's about it. Larger scorpions inject more venom which takes longer to eliminate from your body, but small scorpions have less effect. My wife picked up a diaper bag from the floor at my mother's house and a tiny scorpion stung her on the arm. Obviously the scorpion is not stinging to obtain prey, which is what the stinger is for, but just protecting itself from the giant animal clumsily stomping near it.

When I worked as a carpenter on a job down in the heart of the Big Bend, the hill where we were building a ranch lodge was crawling with scorpions. Every board we picked up had one or more crawling underneath, and they would crawl on the ceiling and drop down onto our clothing. It was a nightmare. The illegals that worked for the boss had a game where they pinched off the stinger of a large scorpion and let it grab an unwary worker on the ear lobe with its pincer. I witnessed a terrible fist fight one day when one guy didn't like that prank.

Okay...that is the terrible aspect of living in a scorpion-infested world. Scorpions that aren't assaulted by humans perform a service for us. They eat a variety of insects, including flies, spiders and centipedes, which actually makes them beneficial to humans. They capture their prey with the two large pincers, hold it down and sting it to subdue it. Then they vomit stomach digestive juices onto them to dissolve the flesh, slurping the insect slurry with their tiny mouth parts until most of the victim is gone.

Reproductively, male and female scorpions are very courtly. They grasp each other with their pincers and begin a scorpion round dance, moving around until the right moment. The male deposits his sperm onto the ground and the female maneuvers over and draws it up into an opening on her stomach. After eight months about 30 baby scorpions are ready to be born, emerging from the female in a live birth...no eggs. The female guides them up onto her back where they stay until their first molt. Now they are ready to move off into the environment to hunt and reproduce for themselves. Kind of cute and cuddly, right? Uh, not really.



Striped bark scorpions are prolific and live under boards, rocks and other damp, protected places. They cannot take our daytime heat so they hunt at night or dusk and go into hiding for the day. My backyard at Marathon was alive with scorpions at night. I had no idea they were that numerous. In the winter they move to protected places and hunker down through cold weather. Striped bark scorpions live for about four years and can produce several litters of babies in that time. They average about 2½" in length, with males getting a little larger.

One of the fascinating things about scorpions is that they glow under ultraviolet light. My daughter went with a guy who regularly went to Black Gap Wildlife Preserve to hunt for scorpions, using a so-called "black" light. She went with him one night and was fascinated with what she saw, glimmering blue creatures hugging rocks and soaking up the fading heat in the cool night air.

So...whether you like it or not, here a little advice from someone who has suffered from multiple scorpion stings. If you live in a home frequented by scorpions, make sure to shake out your shoes before putting them on. If you toss your clothes onto the floor, shake them out before you put them back on or toss them into the hamper or washer. Check the ceiling at night before you go to bed to make sure there are no scorpions that might fall into bed with you. My mother was stung by a scorpion and a centipede when they fell into the bed and she rolled onto them. When bringing boxes or firewood into the house, always check to make sure that you don't have scorpion hitchhikers sneaking in. The last scorpion we had in Sanderson came in on a box we had just brought from Marathon. If you turn over a rock or board in your yard, be sure you are wearing gloves or use your foot or a stick to do the job. I watched ten guys a day get stung by removing lumber from a pile.

Use your head, have your house sprayed if necessary (but that didn't work for us in our Marathon house) and just be vigilant. You never know when the critters will show up, and scorpions are definitely not sympathetic to human clumsiness.

And what is in your backyard?