

In My Backyard: Tarantula!

by C. W. (Bill) Smith

As thunderclouds build in the west, an army of black demons begins to march through the countryside. Over rocks, around bushes and crossing highways and dirt roads, the tarantula moves to higher ground. For years I thought that was the only reason, but modern observers have found that most of these tarantulas are males, and they are searching for a mate. It is a spider habit that has been observed for generations by man, and certainly marches back in ancient time for eons...20 million years according to paleontologists. But rather than finding them in my backyard, I am more likely to find them climbing the side of my house.

Tarantulas are some of the largest spiders in the world. They can grow up to six inches in diameter (including the legs) in Texas, where we have 14 species, in varying colors. One of the most beautiful is the Rio Grande Gold, according to the Texas Parks and Wildlife web site (http://tpwmagazine.com/archive/2010/mar/ed_3/index.phtml) But, our local tarantulas are beautiful, as well, with black or dark brown hairy legs and abdomen and black, yellow or grey head-thoraxes.

Tarantulas have 2-part bodies. The head and thorax are fused together into a cephalothorax, which is attached to the abdomen. They have eight legs, as opposed to the insects' six legs. Tarantulas have extra parts attached to the head-thorax: two mouth parts with large fangs used to inject their poison and two parts called pedipalps, which help to handle their food, dig burrows and sense their surroundings. The male tarantula also has bulb-like devices on the pedipalps which hold their sperm and are used in reproduction.

As with other spiders, adult tarantulas shed their skin about once a year. Young tarantulas shed more often as they grow, since they have an outer skeleton and not an inner one like mammals, reptiles and birds. If an adult loses a leg, as often happens, it can be regenerated in repeated molts.

The tarantulas found in our part of Texas are also found in nearby states and in Mexico. But the word tarantula has been used to describe a number of species of spiders, not all related. The original term comes from Italy where a large wolf spider in the neighborhood of Taranto, Italy, was first to use the name centuries ago. But as the New World was explored, huge native spiders up to 12 inches in radius (including the legs) co-opted the name. Around the world there are some 920 species described as tarantulas.

Although tarantulas have toxic venom, they are very peaceful and seldom bite. Only a few cases of tarantula bites are recorded in Texas each year and usually due to someone doing something stupid and teasing the spider. Many folks have them as pets and allow them to crawl over their exposed arms and head. Sorry, I'm not that big a fan, but they are interesting.

Tarantulas are not considered to be true spiders by experts. They do not spin large complicated webs, even though they have web-making ability. More often they use the web to line their burrows where they live to escape predators and the heat of the desert. Females will spin a silk cocoon for their eggs while they wait for them to hatch. Children in Sanderson would pour water down in the burrows to make the spiders come out, or poke sticks in as I did as a child to watch them wiggle the stick and sometimes emerge to see who was bothering them.

Tarantulas in the US live in the desert, prairie, scrub forest, jungle and rain forest habitats, from the southern border up into Missouri, Utah and central California, but all west of the Mississippi.

They are opportunistic, meaning they will eat any animal they can take down, including their favorites...crickets, June bugs, beetles, grasshoppers, cicadas and caterpillars. Larger tarantulas will feed on small rodents, snakes and lizards, even small birds. They will also resort to cannibalism and eat each other.

When the prey is secured, the two large fangs are inserted and the victim is pumped full of venom. The toxic cocktail goes to work liquefying the internal parts, and soon the tarantula is sucking up the broth with a mouth tube, like a kid drinking a milkshake with a straw.

If you have seen a tarantula you have noticed that they are very hairy. Since their vision is weak and limited, the hairy covering on their bodies is used for a sensory organ to detect movement and sound. New World tarantulas



Local tarantula, photo taken on US Highway 90 west of Sanderson. Photo: Bill Smith

also have the ability to scrape off abdomen hairs and fling them into the face of a predator, causing itching and burning in the eyes, mouth, lungs and skin. It was so effective that for years, itching powder sold in novelty stores used tarantula hairs as the main ingredient.

As expected, tarantulas have few enemies. Of course, one of the worst is man, with the widespread use of insecticides and the urban blight of habitat destruction. As far as natural enemies other than man, the tarantula hawk in West Texas is a wicked adversary. A very large, dark blue wasp with reddish wings will attack the tarantula and sting it, but not to death. A researcher who regularly injects insect venom to determine its pain level has put tarantula hawk venom at the top of the scale of painful venoms, the worst he has ever tried.

In a paralyzed state, the tarantula hawk drags the tarantula into its den and lays an egg on it. The young tarantula hawk hatches and feasts on the comatose tarantula until it emerges and flies away, leaving behind a dry shell. It is a kind of karma for the tarantula, considering its feeding habits.

Female tarantulas can live for 25 years, as found in the South Texas variety, but males live a third of that span. Their purpose, after all, is to sexually mature, find a mate, do their duty and fade away. Apparently it is an easy job if you can find it, but not a long career. At least they are not like black widows and praying mantises and get feasted on by their partner.

And what is in your backyard?