

In My Backyard Vinegaroon Devil in a Black Dress



Photo: etsystatic.com

Years ago, when we lived in Marathon there was a rite of passage every spring in the Smith household. Like the arrival of the swallows to Capistrano and the Monarch butterflies to the Terrell County Court House lawn, there was a winter-breaking event in our house...the arrival of the fabled and much-dreaded vinegaroon.

Part scorpion, part spider, all monster, the kids would scream and run for their lives and my wife would cry, "Bill, there's another one of those vinegar-things in the bathroom. Get rid of it!"

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In his defense posture.

And so, about the time the president was throwing out the first baseball of the season, I was dutifully tossing out the first vinegaroon of the year. After coaxing the critter onto a piece of newspaper or into the dustpan, usually prodding it with my wife's fuzzy pink house shoe, I would race with it to the door to toss it out into the back yard before it could run up the paper and up my arm and do its mayhem. Due to our firm catch-and-release policy that scene was repeated often during the summer until cold weather closed down the vinegaroon expressway. I never did figure out where the on-ramp was, but the exit was in our bathroom.

So just what is a vinegaroon? Pronounced "vīh-nīh-gāh-RŌAN" in these parts, they often are mistaken for scorpions. Sometimes called grampus or whip scorpions, indeed they are built like scorpions on the front end with two disturbingly large "pinchers," actually, modified mouth parts, which they wave menacingly when challenged. But at the rear is a bulbous abdomen, totally unlike the scorpion's stinger-tipped tail. Instead, the vinegaroon's tail is a slender tube arched forward over its back when alarmed, or trailing behind when at rest. With beady black eyes, shiny black shell and multitude of legs, this little guy is quite a nightmare!



Female carrying her egg sack.

But is it harmful to humans? Well, one foolish enough to stick his finger into the open claw of a large specimen might get a painful pinch. But vinegaroons have no poison glands and are not venomous, though some folks who are allergic to vinegar might get a reaction. So, like many of our desert dwelling neighbors the vinegaroon is much maligned but boringly benign.

The word vinegaroon comes from the Spanish "vinagre" (vinegar) and the suffix "on." In Mexico, they are called "vinagrillo" because their favorite prey is "grillos," or crickets. They also eat roaches, worms, slugs and whatever else they can catch, including all kinds of creepy crawly pests in our yards (and apparently in my house as well). Nocturnal and ever vigilant, they constantly prowl for fresh prey. When a likely target is spotted, some writers claim the vinegaroon aims its whip tail over its back, directs a volley of concentrated acetic acid to blast its prey, and grabs the stunned victim for a leisurely lunch. Others claim the vinegaroon uses the concentrated (85%) acetic acid only as a defense mechanism. One writer claims the acid can be hurled up to 500 cm, or 16.67 feet! We know dilute acetic acid as vinegar, accounting for the name and the vinegary odor when you rile one up. Other species emit formic acid, the smell of mashed ants, and still others give off a bleachy, chlorine odor. Shades of Clorox!

Vinegaroons are found worldwide in mostly tropical or subtropical



Vinegaroon babies being carried on their mother's back.

habitats, burrowing into the ground or under rotting logs and stumps with their ever-helpful pincers. They adapted well to our desert, and range throughout the southwestern US and into Mexico. Our species, Mastigoproctus giganteus, sometimes grows quite large, according to some writers up to 6 inches. True arachnids, vinegaroons have the requisite 8 legs, though the first two legs are thin and look like antennae, or "feelers."

Vinegaroon reproduction is not very glamorous. Whereas scorpions perform a courtly minuet that ends in "amor," and black widow romance is very careful and calculated and often culminates in fine dining for the lady, the practical vinegaroon male deposits his sperm on the ground as a foamy, upright structure and maneuvers the female over the spot to receive his gift into her reproductive opening, all very clinical...and boring. She lays a clutch of 35 eggs in a silky bag deposited in a burrow. Ever the good mommy, she stays with the eggs until they hatch and takes the tiny snow-white babies up onto her back where they ride in safety until their first molt. Emerging as perfect little whip scorpions, they depart for greener pastures and Mamacita soon dies. And what becomes of Papacito? He leaves soon after mating to court another fine "señorita" and to enjoy "muchas comidas de grillos."

And what's in your backyard?