

Fall-Invading Spiders

Barb Ogg
UNL Extension Educator

Why do spiders get such a bum rap? As a group, they are the most abundant insect predators in many terrestrial ecosystems. Some experts have estimated more than 400,000 spiders per acre in field habitats. Spiders eat a lot of insects which would seem to make spiders good to have around the house. They are also food for birds, small mammals and even other spiders. Spiders are clearly important in the balance of nature.

Some cultures have worshiped spiders. The Pueblo and Navajo people have a creation myth about the Spider Woman. The Spider Woman, created animals and humans out of clay and attached them to her with a silken thread. In China and Japan legends, spiders are considered to possess much wisdom. Spiders were once believed to bring good fortune. It was also believed that killing a spider would bring you bad luck.

The reason spiders get such a bum rap is that many people are afraid of them. Sometimes, people are unreasonably fearful—about 35 percent of the population suffers from some level of arachnophobia.

In the fall of the year, spiders move into cracks and crevices to hibernate through the winter. If there's a crack they can squeeze into, they may find their way into your house. Don't panic...chances are fall-invading spiders are completely harmless.

Accurate spider identification is based on the pattern of eyes (most spiders have eight), which means looking at spiders closely with a microscope or hand lens. Here are some of the most common spiders people bring us for identification:

Wolf spiders (family Lycosidae). Wolf spiders scare people because they are big, hairy and run real fast. They are the largest spiders in Nebraska, but there are many smaller species. Wolf spiders react to vibrations caused by movement of prey and pounce on their prey at night. The female wolf spider is unusual because she takes care of her brood. She carries a silken egg case until the eggs are ready to hatch and then rips the cocoon open. The spiderlings crawl on their mother's back for about a week, then disperse. Wolf spiders have eight eyes arranged in a distinctive pattern, but they don't see very well.

Sac spiders (family Clubionidae). These small spiders may be light or dark colored. They don't have distinctive color patterns, but often have a slightly darker stripe on the upper middle of the abdomen. They are called sac spiders because they spin a silken tube and hide inside it during the daytime. Like wolf spiders, sac spiders are active hunting spiders. Some people may have an adverse reaction to the bite of a sac spider.

Grass spiders (family Agelenidae). Many people confuse grass spiders with the brown recluse spiders because

of the two dark stripes on their cephalothorax. Another characteristic that distinguishes grass spiders is a pair of web-making spinnerets which extend from under the abdomen.

Grass spiders are also called funnel-web spiders because they spin flat, horizontal webs with a funnel at one end. The spider hides in the funnel and waits for insects to land on the flat web.

Triangulated household spider, *Steatoda triangulosa*. This spider is very common in homes, outbuildings and sheltered places. It is quite small—the body is only about 1/8- to 1/4-inch long. The cephalothorax is brownish orange. The center of its brown abdomen has several distinctive white and yellow triangular spots, which explains its common name. Its legs are light yellow, with slightly darker rings at the ends of the joints. This spider builds a cobweb to catch prey. During the day, it hides near the web, but sits in its web at night.

This spider is related to the black widow, but there have never been any cases of human envenomation.

What to do about fall invading spiders? Sealing cracks and crevices is the most permanent way of keeping spiders out. Use sticky traps to catch wandering spiders. For more great spider photos, go to <http://lancaster.unl.edu/pest/resources/SpiderPhotos.shtml>



Wolf spider

Jim Kalisch, UNL Department of Entomology



Yellow sac spider (above) and as seen in a typical corner web (right)

Jim Kalisch, UNL Department of Entomology



Barb Ogg, UNL Extension



Grass spider

Leon Higley, UNL Department of Entomology

Brown Recluse Spiders Are a Serious Pest

Barb Ogg
UNL Extension Educator

Some of the irrational anxiety about spiders can be attributed to the brown recluse spider. A quick Internet search will find horrendous stories and revolting pictures of brown recluse spider bites.

This spider is found in Lincoln/Lancaster County. We have noticed most brown recluse spider infestations are found in commercial businesses, warehouses or storage facilities and apartment buildings, but rarely in single family homes. We believe these infestations originated with boxes of goods shipped from an infested location.

Several apartment buildings in Lincoln have been seriously infested with brown recluse. In these cases, it is likely tenants may have inadvertently caused an infestation by moving infested boxes with them—especially if they moved from an infested apartment or from southern states where brown recluse spiders are more common. It is still rare to find brown recluse spider in a single-family home.

Brown recluse spiders are medium-sized spiders and are tannish brown to dark brown in color. These spiders have a fiddle-shaped mark on their



Brown recluse spiders have a fiddle-shaped mark on their back

Jim Kalisch, UNL Department of Entomology

back, although it may be faded or missing in juvenile spiders. Their legs are long and thin compared with many spiders. The key feature that distinguishes them from all other spiders is that they have six eyes, arranged in pairs. A microscope or magnifying glass is needed to see this level of detail.

Unlike most other spiders, this is a spider that lives quite comfortably indoors. It is found most commonly in undisturbed areas like closets, attics, crawlspaces, basements, cellars. These spiders inhabit clothing, boxes, papers and like "layered" situations, like stacks of papers or clothes.

Brown recluse spiders are hunting spiders and are active at night. In the morning they may crawl into articles of clothing. People may get bitten when they dress and inadvertently "trap" the spider between the article of clothing and their skin. They may also get bitten if the spider is

trapped in bed clothes or when people are cleaning infested areas. These spiders are very shy and do not bite unless trapped or threatened.

The bite may not be noticed when it occurs. Typically, the lesion begins four to six hours after the bite and expands outward. It may become necrotic and ulcerous and can take months to heal. Plastic surgery, skin grafts may be necessary to repair the

skin. Other symptoms are: fever, nausea, vomiting, headache, rashes.

It is impossible to identify a spider from a spider bite, but bites that become ulcerous are usually (and sometimes mistakenly) attributed to the brown recluse spider. There are other spiders whose bites may become inflamed and ulcerous. Persons bitten by a spider should make an effort to collect the spider and take it to the doctor or clinic for identification. Positive identification can be helpful in determining the type of medical care needed. In the case of the brown recluse, prompt medical attention may be needed to prevent a serious reaction.

Controlling brown recluse infestations is difficult because of the reclusive nature of these spiders. We recommend working with an experienced pest control professional because of the difficulty in controlling this serious pest problem.



Triangulate household spider (highly magnified)

Jim Kalisch, UNL Department of Entomology

Some interesting facts about spiders:

- Only about half the world's spiders spin webs to catch their prey. The rest either actively stalk their prey or wait in ambush somewhere.
- Young spiders draw out silken stands captured by the wind to transport them to new habitats. This is called "ballooning."
- Silk made by some orb weaver spiders rivals the tensile strength of steel.
- Almost all spiders have venom which stuns or kills prey. They don't attack people.
- Spiders inject digestive juices into the captured insect, which dissolve tissues. The spider then ingests the liquid, digested fluid. This is called extra-oral digestion.
- Most spiders have eight eyes, but most don't see very well. Many only see the difference between light and dark. Jumping spiders have the best vision.
- Daddy longlegs aren't actually spiders and do not have venom. They belong to the family Pholcidae and are properly called "harvestmen."