Spiders are not insects, but arachnids. They have two body parts (carapace and abdomen), eight legs, produce silk and contain venom. The thought and sight of spiders create anxiety and fear in many people, but there is an exceptional level of fear reserved for brown recluse spiders.

**Identification**

Brown recluse spiders are surprisingly plain, lackluster spiders. Adults are no longer than 1/2-inch in length (not including the legs), with long, slender legs. They are uniformly a light brown color, with a dark brown violin-shaped spot on the carapace. The entire body is covered with hairs, but there are no spines, patterns, stripes, bands or spots on either the abdomen or legs.

Most spiders have eight eyes, but the brown recluse spider has six, arranged in three pairs. This is true even as juveniles, when there is no violin-shaped marking. Many brown recluse lookalikes can be deciphered by the eye pattern.

**Distribution**

Southeast Nebraska is close to the northern range of the brown recluse spider. They are most concentrated in Missouri and Arkansas, between the Rockies and Appalachian mountains. They are not very good at dispersing and require human movement for introductions into new areas.

**Behavior, Habitat, Food**

Brown recluse spiders are as their name implies: shy, non-aggressive, seclusion and avoider of conflict. They are found in seldom-disturbed areas such as attics, crawlspaces, cellars, woodpiles, basements, garages, closets, in cardboard boxes with clothing, shoes and other stored items. Instead of using silk, they wander nocturnally, capturing crickets, springtails, cockroaches, firebrats and other soft-bodied insects.

**Spider Bites**

Brown recluse spiders possess a type of venom, called a cytotoxin, which can be medically important to humans. This toxin has the potential to inflict injury to the victim and be dangerous to the very young, old and immunocompromised if bitten. However, spider bites are quite rare and only 10 percent of bites ever need medical attention.

Doctors commonly misdiagnose mysterious wounds and painful sores as spider bites, overlooking approximately 40 different conditions (i.e. bacterial, viral or fungal infections, drug reaction, insect bites, tick-borne illnesses, poison ivy, chemical burn, skin cancer, etc.). There are typically no witnesses or spider body (dead or alive) to confirm a wound was the result of a spider bite. Spiders do not require a blood meal to survive or lay eggs, unlike blood-feeding pests. There is no benefit for them to bite humans, so they avoid using their venom except as defense. In the instances when bites were confirmed, spiders were found near clothing, bedding or shoes and contact was made.

**Integrated Pest Management**

Spiders are difficult to control with chemicals alone because they are able to avoid contact with treated surfaces. They can also go long periods of time without feeding, so by the time they do their damage, they hide, and the chemical may have little toxicity left.

Non-chemical measures of control include the following: reduce clutter in and around the building, eliminate cardboard as storage containers, pull bed away from the wall, remove bed skirt and blanket touching the floor, shake clothes and shoe before wearing, look before reaching into storage containers, vacuum frequently and use sticky traps to trap wanderers.

**Summary**

It is important to understand spiders are a part of the food web and spaying an insect is just an indication there are prey items nearby. If a brown recluse spider is found in the building where you work or play or live, stay calm. Take the necessary precautions to avoid bites. If you have been bitten by a spider, check with your local extension office to have it identified.

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**Harness the Insect-Eating Goodness of Bats With a Bat House**

Every year, we get many calls on bats found in and around homes in the Lancaster County area. Bats are not rodents. They are the only mammals capable of true flight. Bats are nocturnal and you rarely see them during the day unless they’ve been disturbed or you happen to notice their droppings.

All of the bats in Nebraska are insectivores. This means they only feed on insects like mosquitoes and moths. One little brown bat (Myotis lucifugus) can eat 600–1,200 mosquito-sized insects every hour — better than any “bug zapping” trap.

Male bats take over warmer houses, while females need the heat to keep their pups (baby bats) warm for their pups. Male bats prefer cooler houses, and in the fall they'll move toward the east or the Ohio Valley to hibernate. The exact temperature needed for successful hibernation varies by bat species. If hibernating bats are disturbed and wake too often during hibernation, they won’t have enough fat reserves to survive the winter and starve.

**Purchasing or Building a Bat House**

If you already have bats in your area, you'll have better luck attracting residents to a bat house. To see if you have bats, watch outdoor lights at night to see if bats are zipping in and out feeding on insects attracted by the lights. Of course you'll want to do this when the weather warms next spring and summer.

I know I have bats by watching the sky at dusk. Just outside my bedroom window to my night roost, the sky is light enough to see but the sun has set, my neighbors and I stand outside and watch the bats as they quickly maneuver in the sky to catch insects.

Several designs are available for bat houses. You may be able to find a bat house suitable for the bats in our area at one of our local garden, lawn or home specialty stores. Or, you can build a bat house! There are many design plans available. Check out the Nebraska Extension NeGuide, “Bat House Construction and Installation” (G1575) available at http://lancaster.unl.edu/pest/bats.shtml or from your local Nebraska Extension office.

**Placing Your Bat House**

If possible, place your bat house within 1/4 mile of standing water. A stream or pond will provide water for the bats and habitat for the insects they prey on. It doesn’t make much sense to erect a bat house where insects are used; so you’ll have better success placing the house where insects are not used, or the use is limited.

Install the bat house at least 12 feet above the ground and give the bats a minimum of 20–30 feet of clear flight space around the house. You also want the area with the bat house to have minimal human disturbance. It doesn’t really matter if the bat house is installed on a pole or on a building, as long as there is a large landing zone.

Brown recluse spiders can be identified by the arrangement of their six eyes.

Distribution of brown recluse spiders.

Place the bat house on a pole at least 12 feet high with plenty of clear flight space.

About before mounting your bat house on your home.

To reduce accidental encounters with bats that have fallen out of the bat house to the ground, place fencing or ornamental plantings around the base of the bat house mounting pole or site. This helps limit access by climbing predators like raccoons and cats.

**White-Nosed Syndrome**

The number of bats across North America is in decline due to a recent- ly-discovered fungal disease called white-nosed syndrome (WNS). WNS causes bats to lose valuable energy reserves and die during hibernation. Nebraska is the 30th state to confirm the presence of white-nosed syndrome. WNS has killed more than 6 million bats since 2006.

Bats are contagious among bats, but does not affect humans. Care should be taken to discontinue tools and equipment between handling bat houses, exploring caves or frequenting other bat roosting areas.

If WNS is suspected, do not touch the bats. Report finding sick or dead bats to Nebraska Game and Parks, 402-471-0641.