

News

Article from our magazine Regulus: Spiders - useful little critters

By Marie Kayser

Their long hairy legs, big fangs and fat abdomen make spiders one of the most unpopular of all animals. Most people feel disgust or even fear when seeing a spider despite there being no spiders in this part of Europe, which could seriously harm a human in any way.



What is a spider?

Spiders count to the class Arachnids, which also include scorpions, mites, harvestmen and ticks. This class is characterised by the occurrence of four pairs of legs.



Spiders are divided into three different groups, which are characterised by their hunting style: left: Orb-weaver spider (Araneidea) – they build a net to catch their prey; middle: Hunting spiders (Lycosoidea) – these hunt actively for prey; right: Dionycha (e.g. crab or jumping spiders) – they adopt a site-and-wait technique

Spiders are no insects!

More often than not spiders are wrongly counted as insects. Spiders, however, have four pair of legs, whereas insects only have three. Additionally, spiders only have two or less body parts; insects always have three body parts.

However, both are invertebrates, so they have an exoskeleton to protect them. The abdomen of a spider might seem soft and expandable, they must nevertheless shed their entire skin in order to grow. As in insects, spiders can regrow lost segments as long as they moult.

Mating – a deathly business

Agenda

- 29.07
Escapardenne et réserves naturelles
- 05.08
Jardin méditerranéen à Schwebsange
- 14.08 - 15.08
Assomption
- 18.08
Visite guidée
Schlammwiss by night
- 26.08
Porte ouverte à la Schlammwiss
- 26.08
En route avec le berger



Sign up for our newsletter

Male spiders bring themselves in great danger when trying to mate with a female. They must follow a lavish ritual to seduce the female and at the same time make sure it is not being mistaken as food. Female of Orb-weavers for example have special 'hearing-hairs' on their legs to distinguish the male plucking her net from prey struggling in her net. The smallest mistake can mean that the male becomes a small snack for the bigger female. And despite every effort, females often eat males anyway after or even while mating.

The eggs are laid in a cocoon of silk from summer till autumn. The female will often protect her eggs at the beginning, but will die soon after. Generally the eggs overwinter and the little spiderlings only hatch the following spring.



All spiders occurring in this region protect their eggs with a cocoon of silk. In the different species, the spiderlings will either hatch the same or the following year.

Are spiders dangerous?

There are no spiders in this region that can be dangerous for humans, neither through their poison nor through the spreading of diseases! Spiders carefully dose their poison when catching prey and so it barely occurs that a spider will waste their ratio on humans. Additionally, most of our spiders have fangs too small to even penetrate our skin. Instead of biting humans, a spider prefers to adopt their defence position to protect all its vital body parts. Even if one gets bitten by a bigger spider, like the Wasp-spider, this bite is nowhere as painful as the sting of a wasp.



Defence-position of a spider: they are more afraid of you than you are of them!

Why do we need spiders?

Spiders play a vital role in our ecosystem. They eat a huge amount of prey every day and without their help, insects, including pest species, would soon overtake everything. They are the most important predators in our gardens, flower meadows and arable fields. It might be the bigger spiders that scare us the most, but it are also these that have eaten hundreds of flies. One spider eats about 0.1 g per day. Now this might not sound like a lot. But if you consider that this means that all spider on one hectare of land eat about 47.000 kg per year, it doesn't sound that bad after all.

Spiders in my house?

Although spiders hunting inside houses will eat a lot of silverfishes or other unwanted lodgers, not everybody wants to share their house with them. But before reaching for a shoe or newspaper, why not take the spider back outside and let it continue its job? A glass and a piece of paper will do! For those who don't want to get too close to a spider, there are special 'insect- or spider-graspers' with which it becomes easy to catch any spider.

For those who will find the courage to observe spiders more closely, will find it hard not to be fascinated by these little creatures, despite or just because of their monster-like appearance.

European garden spider

Lt.: Araneus diadematus; Name: Garten-Kreuzspinne; Fr.: Épeire diadème; L: Gaarde-Kraizspann



Description: The European garden spider, or cross spider, is probably the best known orb-weaving spider. The name 'cross spider' refers to the cross-markings on the back of its abdomen. Individual spiders' markings can range from light to dark-brown. Some individuals can even be yellow or almost completely black. The cross-marking always contains four stripes and one dot in the middle.

Size: Male 4 – 8 mm; Female up to 18 mm

Occurrence Period: the whole year around. Mature adults can be found from mid summer sitting still in the middle of their nets waiting for prey.

Reproduction: The mating season is in August. Females lay her eggs in a cocoon, which hatch the next spring. Mature adults die after copulation.

Food resources: The spider will eat anything that gets stuck in her net. This can range from annoying mosquitoes to flies, but can also include other useful insects like bees or smaller butterflies.

Habitat: As a generalist, the European garden spider can be found anywhere where there is enough prey flying around. So look for them around your own house, in shrubs, under leaf litter or in wild flower meadows.

Benefits: Although, spiders are not everybody's cup of tea, they play a vital role as predators in a balanced natural environment. They are the most important predators when it comes to control pest species.

Need help with any other creepy crawlies?

It's a lovely summer day and you're about to take a refreshing sip from your lemonade. Then suddenly, out of nowhere, you're under attack! It's a wasp trying to get a sip from your sugary drink too. You're trying to get rid of it by chasing it away with your hands. But all you've achieved is that you've made it even angrier. Did you know that a wasp goes into attack mode if it gets chased away with a hand? Did you know that it would actually be better to just stay still and put the drink away from your mouth and wait for the wasp to fly away?

Similarly, did you know that some wasp species actually feed their larvae with caterpillars and so provide you with free pest control, making the use of harmful pesticides unnecessary/obsolete?

If you've got any more questions about how to get rid of unwanted species or how to attract wanted wildlife into your garden, natur&mwelt may be able to help you. They provide a free service helping you with everything from attracting bees to dealing with wasp nests in your house or garden. There are many wildlife-friendly solutions to everything, without unnecessary use of pesticides or other harmful/detrimental methods. Just call the nature information helpline (Naturberodung), where experienced biologists will have a solution for just about anything that you might throw at them.

Phone: 29 04 04 – 313

e-mail: berodung@naturemwelt.lu

<< back