

URBAN ANTICS!



Looking for Jewels

High summer on the Swan coastal plain once more. Shimmering heat, Christmas holidays and things to see and do.

The grey-green thickets of hakea and pricklesh in the spare block over the road, or that remnant of forgotten scrub down by your back fence, are great places to ponder the world - and observe another natural phenomenon.

Each year about this time, the otherwise drab bush is bedecked by orb webs and further enhanced by the appearance of Christmas or jewel spiders (*Gasteracantha minax*).

Unfortunately most of us have grown up with a fear of spiders. This is probably because they are generally viewed as all grotesque, hairy, armour-plated, poisonous and ruthless predators. And so they were some 400 million years ago.

Since then, the evolution of spiders through climate and environmental change has resulted in the many intricate forms and groups that exist today.

The Christmas spider is one of the more acceptable forms, and it is an enjoyable experience to observe this diurnal little aerialist at work in gardens and scrub all over southern Australia.

You can easily recognise the small black spiny spider by its star-shaped abdomen, with bright yellow or white raised patches on a black background.

Occasionally, there are colour variations: all black, red and white body patches, orange and black legs, or greenish-black legs.

The six tapering spines, which give the beast its star shape, are longer on the female than the male, and like most spiders, the female (about 10 mm long) is larger than the male (about 3 mm long).

About early summer, the spiders mature and are quite obvious on their webs, as shafts of sunlight through overhead vegetation transform them into glistening jewels.

At times and in places where there is an abundance of very small insects, hundreds of webs may enswathe surrounding bush.

During summer, the mature spiders mate. To do this successfully, the males, because of their size and need to approach a female's web, must communicate their intention, or be mistaken for prey and killed.

Part of a male jewel spider's courtship ritual is to pluck a successful message with his front legs on the female's web. This stimulates her interest and suppresses her predatory impulse.

By autumn, most of the spiders have laid their eggs in a fluffy, silken yellow sac near the web. Shortly afterwards, they die.

The spiderlings hatch during winter, but it is not until mid-spring that the animals or their webs are large enough to attract our attention once more.

Remember, when looking for jewel spiders, go easy. Don't rush headlong through the bush or you'll end up with web on your face, and when you can't see it, it feels like there's also a huge hairy leg on each side of your face.

JOHN HUNTER

DID YOU KNOW?

- The order *Araneae*, to which spiders belong, is unique and distinguished from other animals in that they produce silk from special glands called spinnerets, which are located on the abdomen.
- The all-black jewel spiders mix and breed with the multi-coloured varieties. Along with the spiny exterior, the colouring is thought to relate to predator avoidance or body temperature regulation.
- Jewel spiders have tiny fangs that operate like pincers, while funnel-web and trapdoor spiders, of the primitive long-lived groups, have huge fangs that operate vertically.

LANDSCOPE

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Twenty-three captive-bred chuditch were recently released in the Julimar forest in an attempt to establish a new population. The story of the 'Return of the Chuditch' is on page 10.



In a remote corner of the Gibson Desert lies Lake Gregory, a birdwatcher's paradise. See page 16.



A silent workforce of volunteers assist CALM with a multitude of projects. Colin Ingram tells us more about these 'Volunteers for Nature' on page 28.



'Back in the Outback' (page 34) follows the trail of endangered mammals recently reintroduced into the Gibson Desert from Barrow Is.



The urban cat vies with its feral cousin and the fox for top spot in the predator stakes. See 'Masterly Marauders' on page 20.

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The chuditch (*Dasyurus geoffroii*) was once found in every State and Territory of mainland Australia. Now it is only found in the jarrah forest and parts of the southern wheatbelt in the south-west of WA - about two percent of its former range.

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