

URBAN ANTICS

Incy Wincy Spiders

In Perth suburbs, autumn never really seems to arrive. Our summer, just like a good wine, seems to mature late, creating a comfortable balance of temperature, taste and bouquet. Weatherwise, the Fremantle Doctor becomes a gentle breeze, the days get balmy and cool dewy nights happen here and there. With autumn comes the peak of the arthropod season, a time when little things around the house start to make a large impression.

Arthropods are the most numerous and widespread group of animals and include such diverse forms as insects, spiders, centipedes, millipedes, scorpions and crustaceans. They are all characterised by a hard jointed external skeleton, to allow movement, and have paired jointed limbs. From time to time, as these types of animals grow, they shed their outside skeleton for a new, larger one growing beneath it.

Insects far outnumber all other arthropods. On late autumn afternoons, golden shafts of sunlight highlight an atmosphere that is a swarming soup of darting bodies, which become the main food source for predators of their own kind and higher animals.

For most household dwellers of the arthropod kind, this time of year is bliss. Young spiders that established territories around the house during spring will now be evident by their much larger webs. The most obvious is the wheel-weaving garden spider (*Eriophora piapicata*), which has probably put a spectacular web right outside your kitchen window. Because of the regular light that attracts insects each night, this clever creature is now a fat, heavily built,

grey-brown hairy beast, that hides under the eaves at daybreak. Unlike humans, who stumble full faced into the web and freak out in a most undignified way, this harmless animal simply leaves the scene as quickly as possible and without any fuss.

Also obvious, are the funnel-shaped, lace webs of the black house spider (*Badumna insignis*), which, although being regularly cleared away, just keep on re-appearing around window corners and brickwork. The last time I cleaned the under side of my verandah roof, a coal-black stoutly built resident dropped down my shirt and sunk its fangs into my back. Ouch!! For me, there was no muscular pain, perspiration and vomiting, just an itchy rash. A small child may not have been so unaffected.

Of course, it wouldn't be a show without a red-back spider (*Lactrodectus hasseltii*), and at this time of year, their hotchpotch tangle of threads will be under, behind and in most garden pots and furniture. Take care before you stick that used chewing gum under the neighbours patio seat, otherwise you might have to be forgiven for thinking that's where he's kept his pit-bull terrier.

The good old daddy long-legs (*Pholcus phalangioides*) should not be forgotten. Their tangled irregular webs of thin dry silk are often undetected in cupboards, sheds and behind toilet cisterns. Panic not, however; this venomous dandy has minute fangs and long shanks which make it impossible to bite human skin. They do, however, ambush black house spiders, which is rather nice to know.

Huntsman spiders (families Heteropodidae and Selenopidae) are classic beasts. Mismnamed tarantulas, because of their large hairy bodies and very long legs nearly the size of your hand, these sideways running crab impersonators have been known to wrap themselves around warm security sensors, causing blue lights and sirens to activate.

The autumn stories of arthropods are endless; there are millions out there. As it is now the 'GO' season for these 'creepy-crawlies', just be a little observant when going about your chores. Be careful and kindly, don't touch them and you'll be fine. If you have to shift them, be nice about it, or next year's recruits might come and get you.

JOHN HUNTER

DID YOU KNOW?

- *Insects have a body divided into a head, thorax and abdomen, three pairs of legs, simple compound eyes, and antennae. They may have wings.*
- *Spiders have a body divided into cephalothorax (head and thorax) and abdomen, four pairs of walking legs, usually eight simple eyes, lack antennae and never have wings.*
- *You can explore with a torch at night when most spiders' eyes glitter like diamonds.*

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LANDSCOPE

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Western Everlasting, see page 22, follows the same successful approach to protecting threatened plants as Western Shield did for mammals.



Beneath its black and burnt exterior, the common balga is giving up its secrets. See 'Believing the Balga' on page 10.



For 25 years, CALM's Wildlife Research Centre in Woodvale has been 'A Centre of Diversity'. See page 36.



The spectacular coastline of Torndirrup National Park has been years in the making. See page 28.



Read how locals, CALM and other agencies are working together to save the Lake Muir-Unicup wetlands. See page 49.

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'Moving Mala' (page 17) tells the story of the translocation of these endangered mammals from Australia's Central Desert Region to a small island off WA's north coast.

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