FAUNA

Christmas Spiders

WHEN seed collecting recently, I struggled not to damage - or become enmeshed in - the huge numbers of Christmas spider webs that festooned the bushland. Every year, I always wonder where on earth they come from!

The Christmas or jewel spider (*Gasteracantha minax*) is found in gardens and bushland all over southern Australia and also extends into the tropics. The species occurs in many habitats from windswept coastal islands on the west coast to inland shrubby woodlands where it achieves its greatest abundance. Hundreds of webs may occur together in giant colonies, catching flying insects such as midges and flies.

It is a small black short-legged spiny spider with a star-shaped abdomen having bright yellow or white patches on the black background. Adult females of these attractive little spiders may reach about 10 or 12 mm across the abdomen. The males are much smaller and, although similarly shaped, the six spines which give the abdomen its star-shaped outline are stumpy in comparison to the long tapering spines of the females. Both sexes occur together in the colonies but during the late spring and early summer when the spiders mature, males can readily be distinguished by their small size and the bulbous 'palps', the appendages by which males transfer sperm to the female.

By autumn most of the spiders have mated after which they lay their eggs and die. The egg sac is usually attached to a twig or under bark on a branch adjacent to the web. It is about the size of the female and is protected by a silken covering. The spiderlings hatch during the winter but it is not until mid-spring that the spiders or their fragile webs are large enough to attract notice.

As local spider expert Barbara York Main said: "When hiking through the bush I have often expressed as much irritation as any araneophobe when I have stumbled into a tangle of webs. But irritation soon changes to delight and admiration. Some years these little spiders are more abundant than others.

"I remember one spring when in the eastern wheatbelt out beyond Hyden in WA - after a particularly good winter season - coming across thousands of webs strung in groups of any number from half a dozen to 40 and more. In some patches of bush, many hectares in extent, it was almost impossible to walk without becoming enmeshed. We had to pick our way between the colonies. It was late in the afternoon, and shafts of sunlight fell through the groves of sheoaks around a granite rock and lit up masses of webs. The shimmering nets provided a spectacle which dispelled any initial frustration and annoyance.

"Although most colonies consisted of dozens of individual webs which shared many of the supporting threads, and formed three-dimensional structures, there were also smaller colonies built on a single plane. Less frequently a common framework strung between bushes supported a row of orbs or several rows of orbs, one above the other to form a fragile repetitive pattern like the ironlace decorating balconies on colonial terrace houses or outback pubs or - more realistically - a delicate piece of Victorian tatting. What a delightful motif for some latter-day designer of the fashionable mock iron-lace now being mass produced in cast aluminium!"

If you would like to read more of Barbara's wonderful lyrical discriptions of Arachnid natural history, read 'Spiders': pub. Collins, Sydney, 1976.

Penny Hussey