Life in your Backyard

Some bizarre habits of spiders...

Here are some of the many bizarre spiders that we have come across over the years. Have you spotted any of these?

Vena Kapoor & Divya Uma

1. The spitting spider:

As its name suggests, this small and globular spider ejects a glue-like substance from its mouth to capture and stun its prey. Once stunned and captured by this glue-like substance, the spider then moves closer to it, injects it with venom and rapidly wraps silk around it to feed on it at leisure.

A spitting spider

Source: Carlos De Sá Nogueira, Wikimedia Commons, URL: http://www.flickr.com/photos/cosmoflyer/3820116/, License: CC-BY-NC-ND

2. The net-casting spider:

As you may have guessed from its name, this nocturnal (active at night) spider's web is shaped like a small net. It dangles this net with its first two pairs of legs. When an unsuspecting insect happens to pass by, the spider drops this net web and entangles it.

A net-casting spider

Source: Geoff Gallice, Wikimedia Commons, URL: https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Net-casting_spider_%28Pholcidae%29_%2B_prey_%2B_egg_sac.JPG, License: GC-BY

3. The scorpion spider:

Because of its extended abdomen and posture in its orb-web, one has to look twice to detect this spider! As if that's not confusing enough, the brown coloured variety of this spider resembles a dried up leaf!

A scorpion spider

Source: Sony Scientific, Commons and Image used with permission.

4. The bird-dropping spider:

There's a reason this spider has been given such a strange name – one of its hunting techniques involves resembling the fresh dropping of a bird! Research shows that because of this, birds (its main predators) are unable to detect these spiders. And butterflies that visit bird droppings to get a few essential nutrients, can get fooled into becoming food for these spiders!

A bird dropping spider

Source: Fritz Vollrath, Wikimedia Commons, URL: http://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Bird_dropping_spider_Cleptomeris_West_JPG, License: CC-BY-SA

5. An ant with eight legs?

Spiders belonging to around 12 different families mimic the external appearance and behaviour of ants, and are called Ant-Mimic spiders. Very often they are found close to the ant colonies that they mimic. Why do some spiders mimic ants? Research has shown that many predators of ants, including birds, mantids and wasps, tend to avoid catching ants because they can be aggressive or unpalatable. If a spider looks like an ant, however, they are avoided as well! Some spiders may also look and smell like ants, emitting a pheromone (scent) similar to the ants they mimic. By doing this, these spiders can confuse ants in the colony, and hunt ants or ant eggs, that are otherwise well guarded.

An ant-mimic

Source: Kathmann B, License: Copyright, Image used with permission.

i wonder...
Rediscovering school science

Vena Kapoor works with the Nature Conservation Foundation, Bangalore. Even since she was shown the architecturally perfect web of a tent spider, she was hooked to these creatures. Some of her fondest memories are looking for and documenting spiders found in the lush rainforests of the Western Ghats, India. Vena can be contacted at vena@ncf-india.org

Divya Uma works at the School of Liberal Studies, Azim Premji University, Bangalore. She teaches biology to undergraduate students, and works on predator-prey interactions as well as mimicry in spiders and insects. She has a special soft corner for jumping spiders. Divya can be contacted at divya.uma@apu.edu.in

Azim Premji University