

Brown recluse and black widow: More myths than monsters

By Mark Wheeler / Hi-Desert Star

Friday, July 16, 2004 11:59 PM PDT

For "creepy," nothing really beats a spider. Snakes may send shivers up the spine for some people. The idea of a pack of wild dogs roaming the woods or a mountain lion stalking the neighborhood hills may put the fear of God in the hearts of others. But, for good old hair-raising, skin-crawling creepiness, spiders win the honors hands down, or legs down, as it were.



Consider those legs, all eight of them, moving their load of multiple eyes and fangs and bulbous abdomen across the S say, inside of your upper arm, or the back of your neck. Think of all that creepy spiderness lurking in your clothes, or in your shoes. Think of the bite, and think especially of the bite from those spiders bearing certain markings, like the red hourglass and the fiddle.

These two famous insignias distinguish two of the most notorious gems in the southwest desert's eight-legged world: the black widow and the brown recluse - nature's own fright-Ninjas.

Neither of them weighing more than a gram, both the widow and recluse carry a fearful weight of bad reputation. Nearly all of it, though, is earned less through any fault of theirs than it is through our own irrational fear of them, and the dread-rhetoric we so often use to write about them. See previous paragraphs.

Myth Busting

Significant efforts have been made over the last two decades to increase and improve the public information base on a multitude of subjects related to nature. As more and more authorities share their expertise on a subject with the public by way of popular magazines, books and TV broadcasts, gradually the public perception of many traditionally reviled and misunderstood properties of nature has been purged of foolish myth and ignorance.

Rick Vetter is on this team of myth-cleansers. A research associate at both UC Riverside and the San Bernardino County Museum, his part in the crusade operates strictly on the eight-legged level. The widow and especially the recluse are his specialties, and taking the facts about them to the public is his personal mission in life.

So, what does Vetter have to say about these two specters of the dark corners and shaded places in our houses? For one thing, he insists, "although both these spiders can be injurious, far more damage is attributed to them than is supported by the facts."

Facts dispute Anecdotes

Having published more on the recluse's bite in American medical journals than any other authority - the New England Journal of Medicine is currently reviewing one of his pieces - Vetter is well-acquainted with the medical literature on his specialty.

According to his study of that literature, there have been exactly zero deaths resulting from "reported, proven recluse bites." As for the widow, she has a higher score with exactly eight.

Vetter is not such an ideologue as to suggest there haven't been unreported or misreported cases of death and serious injury resulting from bites delivered by his study subjects. However, he points to the record and states flatly, "This is all we know that has been proven."

Proof is important for Vetter. It has made him the country's foremost forensics expert on poisonous spider bites, and it drives the rapid-fire pace of his public appearances.

Mistaken Identity

"Is this a recluse bite?" (Slide of gruesome wound.)

"No. It is staphylococcus."

"Is this a recluse bite?" (Slide of another wound.)

"No. It is a herpes lesion."

Working with slides, humor and an evangelical zeal, Vetter cajoles, exhorts and challenges his lecture audiences to learn the truth about his spiders. Not only will they be relieved of the worthless embarrassment of irrational fear he believes most people have of these creatures, he also argues that knowing the facts will make people safer.

In the wound section of his slide show, for instance, Vetter cites case after case of medical misdiagnosis. Everything from anthrax to chemical burns to

lyme disease has been diagnosed as brown recluse poisoning, and in some cases, patients died because the misdiagnosis delayed treatment for the proper ailment.

An incident of this took place recently in Indianapolis when a man died from what had been diagnosed as a recluse bite. It was more than an embarrassment for the medical establishment when a coroner's exam found the man had actually died of untreated streptococcus infection, a serious but common bacterial condition customarily treated with ordinary antibiotics.

Who Do You Hate?

Perhaps if the spiders were predatory on us, or even aggressive, Vetter wouldn't waste so much breath championing their cause. The fact is, though, both the widow and the recluse are well-known for their shy natures. Neither of them has the slightest need for anything we've got; not flesh, hair, blood or spit.

If we want to hate the predators and aggressors in our lives, we might start with the mosquito, conenose bug, louse, tic, mites and a host of other little devils that make a specialty of making us miserable, sick, and sometimes dead. By comparison with this lineup of bloodthirsty villains, the widow and recluse are almost saintly.

One of Vetter's many study projects helped prove the geniality of the recluse quite nicely. Over a six-month period, a family of four living in an old farm house in Kansas once belonging to Wild Bill Hickock collected all the recluses they found indoors. By the count's end, they had 2,055 of them, verified. Despite this infestation, during the eight years of the family's occupancy, not one member had ever suffered any wound or injury that could be attributed to any spider.

Know Your Enemy

None of Vetter's work is intended to criticize or ridicule rational caution with respect to these spiders. On the contrary, he encourages people to learn what they can about the two species because, as the evidence shows, what people don't know about them - and this includes doctors - can be just as dangerous, and maybe even more dangerous than the actual bite itself.

When Vetter brought his recluse show to the Hi-Desert Nature Museum recently, he assured the audience he wasn't suggesting people should take the widow and recluse for granted. "Their bites can be dangerous to some people," he made very clear, but he also warned against the foolishness of

fearing them morbidly, and against attributing every mystery wound and lesion to them.

"You've only been bitten by a widow or recluse if you've got the spider and it's been correctly identified," he emphasized. "Otherwise, you could have something else."

For identification, he suggested people take their samples to the Hi-Desert Nature Museum, or dial up his Web site, **spiders.ucr.edu**, and follow directions there.

Probably nothing Vetter or anyone can say will take the creepiness out of our perception of eight-leggers, but then, no one expects the human race to raise the spider to the top of its "Favorite Pets" list. We can, however, learn more about the notorious ones, and in the process learn to live with them more sensibly. That's Vetter's hope, and we can only assume it's also the hope of every spider in every closet corner that would probably prefer we didn't squash it just for having eight legs and looking creepy.