

Conservation Corner

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As we plan our annual Halloween Hike coming up on Saturday, October 20, I'm looking forward to sharing some of the many fascinating and cool facts about spiders with our riders. Many people view spiders as creepy, undesirable, and downright dangerous. Nothing could be further from the truth! In reality, spiders are beneficial predators that specialize in pest control. Did you know one spider in your yard may eat up to 2,000 insects a year?



Spiders, of course, are members of the arachnid family which also includes ticks, mites, and scorpions. To be classified as a spider, one must have two body parts, eight legs, eight or rarely six simple eyes, no wings, no antennae, and fangs for mouthparts.

All spiders produce silk. The liquid silk is produced in spinnerets at the top of the spider's abdomen which hardens as it comes in contact with the air. Spiders spin silk to build webs and snares, egg cases, draglines, shelters, and retreats. Young spiders produce "ballooning" silk that enables them to be carried away by air currents and wind.

All spiders are predators who immobilize their prey by injecting venom. Next, they inject digestive fluids allowing the spiders to suck up the liquefied insects, mites, and other small arthropods for dinner. Fortunately for us, most spiders are harmless to people and incapable of biting. Only two Iowan spiders, the brown recluse spider in southern counties and the black widow spider, have venom dangerous for humans. Fortunately, both spiders are rare and reclusive.

Iowa is home to many hunting and web-building spiders, but one of our best known spiders isn't even a true spider. Daddy long legs are Harvestmen, not spiders, as they can't make webs and have no fangs.

I'll close with a timely Native American Legend from the Achomawi tribe in northern California. "Rainbow Makers" from *Spider Spins a Story*, edited by Jill Max, also takes place during a rainy spell.

The rain began to fall and didn't stop. After many trials and temptations, Coyote, two Spider Brothers, two White-footed Mouse boys, Weasel Man, Red Fox Woman, and Rabbit Woman journey to the Old Man Above to ask him to stop the rain. Working together, they blow the two spider brothers through a hole in the clouds. In appreciation of their cooperation, The Old Man Above places the sun back in the sky and promises to send an end-of-the rain sign. The colors of the rainbow sign represent Red Fox Woman's bushy tail, Coyote's fuzzy yellow tail, green forests, blue waters, and the violet sky of twilight. In honor of the brave Spider Brothers, a tiny rainbow now glistens in each spider web.

I can't promise a rainbow on the hike, but I'm pretty sure we'll come across a spider web or two. We'll meet at 3:00 and 6:00 p.m. at Wilcox Park in Rolfe for wagon rides on Three Rivers Trail. Sign up soon to reserve your spot for "Spiders on the Trail." Let's hope the rain stops for us, too.