

A VERY HAIRY BIOGRAPHY

The deserts of Arizona have many well-known inhabitants. The hairiest and scariest of these creatures are tarantulas. Despite their notoriety, the true nature of tarantulas remains a mystery to most people. Here we can reveal some of their secrets and prove that hairy and scary really translates into interesting and worthwhile.

Tarantulas occupy washes and open deserts of the southwest, including regions of the United States, Mexico and Central America. Arizona alone may have up to 30 different species. In our area, most females are blonde to brown in color, with heavy bodies and lots of hair. Their legs can be up to 4 inches long (get out your ruler so you can get an idea of how tall that spider would be). Males have longer, more slender legs than females and are black with reddish colored abdomens. In general, males are more active than females, which may explain why they live only 8-10 years, while females can survive for up to 20.

A tarantula spends its entire life within a few meters of its burrow (and you think YOU don't get out much). Each individual digs its own burrow approximately one foot in depth and spends most of its time in a chamber within the burrow. During construction, the burrow's architect craftily spreads the loose soil away from the entrance, allowing the entrance to go unnoticed. When actively hunting, tarantulas place a number of silk strands near the burrow entrance. Prey species (including insects, lizards, mice and other miscellaneous small creatures) touch these strands in passing, alerting the spider lurking inside to their presence.

After 8-10 years, following a final molt that signifies sexual maturity, a male leaves his home burrow in search of an attractive mate. This occurs between June and October, coinciding with Arizona's monsoon season, and during this time males are frequently seen crawling along roads. Upon finding a female's burrow, a male must make his presence known to her. If she is receptive to his advances, she emerges from her burrow and takes a copulatory posture. The male then grabs her large and formidable fangs and proceeds to deposit his sperm. When finished, he quickly releases his mate's fangs and retreats, in order to avoid attack or even being eaten. The female uses her silk to form a bag for the eggs, which she diligently watches for 6-7 weeks until they hatch. After spending a few days or weeks with mom, young tarantulas go out into the world to seek their fortunes.

Aren't tarantulas cool?!

Cavetta