



Foothills

Nature Notes

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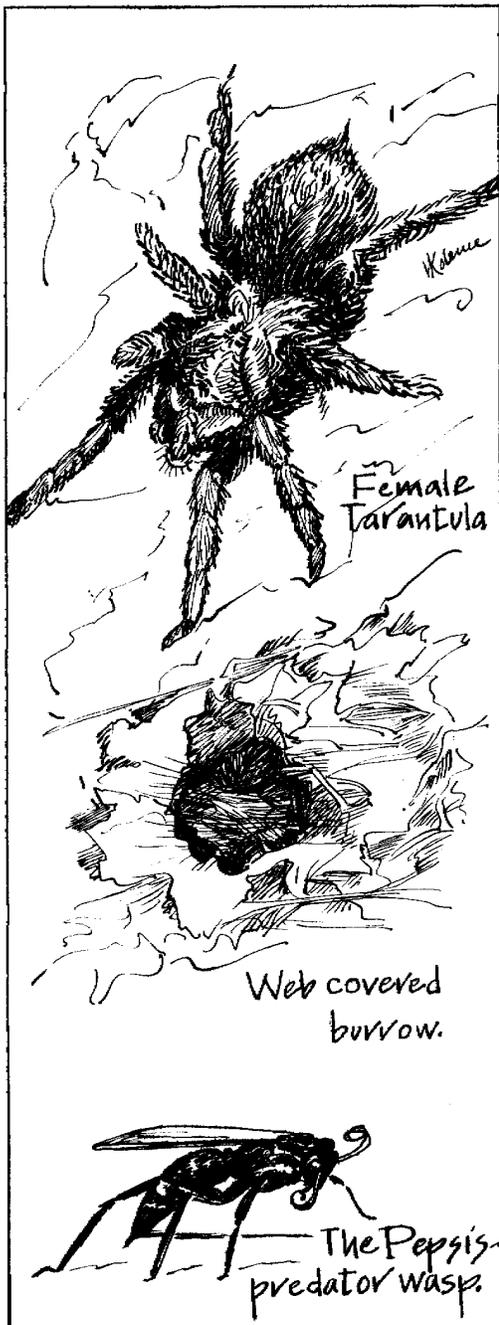
The Time of the Tarantula

“In spring a young man's fancy lightly turns to thoughts of love...” In the fall, the male Hairy Tarantulas, common in our foothills, are similarly preoccupied as they actively seek out the females of the species. Leaving their secluded burrows, they are seen lumbering across roads, gardens, or open areas which lie across their routes of travel. On an early fall evening, a slow watchful drive in the foothills will probably be rewarded with at least one observation of these giant spiders migrating.

Sight of the Hairy Tarantula (*Eurypelma californicum*) is likely to elicit feelings of fear and aversion. Four inches long with legs extended and covered with long, dark brown hairs, it is indeed a formidable looking creature. Actually they are quite harmless. Their venom is no more toxic than that of a bee, and generally do not attempt to bite if they are picked up. When disturbed they rub their hind legs on the top of the hairy abdomen, loosening hairs which have an irritating effect on the skin of would-be captors, especially the mucous membranes around the mouth and eyes.

Having found a female and mated, the male bids a hasty retreat before the unsentimental female kills him. He is destined to die in any event, after having lived about ten years, matured, and then mated. The larger and hardier female may live for 25 years, raising many annual broods of young. Eggs are laid in early summer, wrapped in a silk cocoon, and guarded in the burrow until hatching about six weeks later. After spending a few weeks in the home burrow, the tiny spiderlings disperse to fend for themselves, but few of the hundreds of young will survive to adulthood. Except during the mating season when males are conspicuous on overland migration, these shy, secretive spiders are seldom seen. They stay in their burrows, emerging only at night to feed on crawling insects found within a few feet of their home.

Unlike the Hairy Tarantula, the Smooth Tarantula (*Brachythele longitarsus*), also common in the foothills, is a pugnacious defender of its rights. The two-inch long Smooth Tarantula does not have the long and bristly hairs of its larger cousin. Instead, it is clothed with shorter and finer hairs which give it a velvety appearance. With stout, pointed fangs it digs a vertical tube in the ground on grassy slopes and open hillsides. The burrow may be an inch wide. The upper few inches are usually lined with silk. At



the bottom, a foot or more beneath the surface, is an enlarged chamber where the spider lives. When disturbed it may rear back on its hind legs, raise its forelegs and menacingly expose its shiny, black fangs. While not dangerous, it can inflict a painful bite.

The name tarantula is derived from the town of Taranto, Italy, where in medieval times the townsfolk indulged in a sort of wild, frenzied dancing. Authorities tried to end the dancing but the people insisted it was the only remedy for the bite of the local spider (now known to be harmless). The dance music became known as the Tarantella and the spider, tarantula. Actually, the American tarantulas are unrelated to the Old World "wolf spider." Largest of the tarantulas is a tropical species 10 inches long. Some of these large species feed upon birds, frogs, lizards and small snakes.

The tarantula possesses few natural enemies except for the tarantula hawk or spider wasp (*Pepsis sp.*) The quick and agile female wasp attacks the much larger tarantula and immobilizes it with her poison sting. Though the tarantula may fight valiantly, it is virtually predestined to defeat. The wasp entombs the spider in a burrow she has prepared, deposits her egg upon it, and closes the opening. The voracious wasp larvae grow upon a plentiful supply of fresh food from the spider, alive but unable to move.

By Robert Badaracco, First Park Ranger
Illustrated by Virginia Kolence



Autumn is a good time to
observe these giant
spiders migration
to burrows
near the lake.