

The amazing secrets of spiders

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Much maligned: Everyone knows that spiders make silk and have venom, but few realise that they also fly, play songs, walk on water, solve puzzles and live just about everywhere on the planet, from underwater to the tallest mountain peaks.

Should we learn to love them? Many feel frightened by these creepy-crawlies, but spiders are some of the most wondrous creatures in the natural world.

What's happening?

At least 6% of the population is frightened of spiders. But a new book argues that humans should appreciate these remarkable creatures.

There are roughly 15 quadrillion spiders in the world — 15 followed by 15 zeros! And they can be found almost everywhere: deserts, rain forests, mountains, marshes, and grasslands.

Spiders eat insects, fish, frogs, lizards, mice, bats, voles and even birds. But only three to seven people a year die of spider bites. So, why are we so afraid of them?

Find out more

According to one idea, **arachnophobia** emerged because spiders look like scorpions, which are far more dangerous to humans.

But many spiders are extraordinary. For instance, the *Colonus puerperus* spider can jump almost 40 times its body length, and the flic-flac huntsman spider can double its running speed by cartwheeling across sand dunes.

Scientists have only recently started to understand how spiders' brains work. According to one scientist, they are among the best creatures for exploring learning and decision-making.

Should we learn to love them?

Some say

Yes! Spiders are a vital part of nature, with many unique and extraordinary species.

Others think

No! Spiders can be **venomous** to people, and it is natural to fear them.

Six steps to discovery

Some people say

1. Connect

How do you feel about this story? - Do you suffer from arachnophobia? When you see a spider in

"I am not loved at all. And yet I do nothing but good. All day long I catch flies and mosquitos in my webs. I am a decent person."

Miss Spider, from *James and the Giant Peach* by Roald Dahl (1916 – 1990) British author

What do you think?

your home, do you try to run away, or else rescue it?

2. Wonder

What questions do you have? - For example:
How many species of spider exist in Britain? How many people are bitten by spiders each year?

3. Investigate

What are the facts? - Find out one thing we know for certain and another we cannot say for sure.

4. Construct

What is your point of view? - Do you think that phobias irrational fears that people should overcome? Produce an illustrated leaflet describing how spiders are useful in nature.

5. Express

What do others believe? - In groups, come up with a list of the most common phobias that humans experience. Then, think of a training programme that would help people overcome these phobias.

6. Reflect

What might happen next? - Imagine scientists developed a poison that could kill all spiders but leave every other animal unharmed. Write an essay describing the effect of this spider apocalypse on the rest of the environment.

Glossary

Arachnophobia - An irrational fear or loathing of spiders.

Venomous - Poisonous.