

Tarantulas in the Pacific Northwest¹

Tarantulas (Fig. 1) in the Pacific Northwest? Well, maybe not like the hairy monsters of the tropics, but some very interesting "atypical" species do occur here. Our species belong to the family Antrodiaetidae.

One of our most common spiders is the folding-door spider, *Antrodiaetus pacificus* (Simon). It is a fairly large species, females ranging from 11 to 13 millimeters in length, males slightly smaller. They are generally dark brown to almost black in color with the abdomen purplish brown. Males are characterized by their long legs, slim bodies, and three tergites (hardened plates) on the abdomen. Females (Fig. 2) are more robust with only one tergite.

These spiders excavate burrows in the soil or in damp, rotten wood, digging with a row of spines on each chelicer, known as a ratellum. The six to ten inch deep vertical shafts are lined with silk. The webbing extends beyond ground level as a short collar of camouflaged silk. The turret's two sides may be drawn in by the occupant, forming two "doors" which meet in the middle. At night, *Antrodiaetus* assumes a foraging posture with its pedipalps and first pair of legs just touching the rim of silk at the mouth of the tube. In this position, the folding door spider can readily detect an insect moving above ground. The spider will leap out of its burrow with lightning speed, seize its victim, and drop back down, like a terrorizing Jack-in-the-box. When finished with its meal, it will add the insect's dry, dismembered body to a silk-covered trash pile at the bottom of its burrow. Among the spider's favorite prey are beetles, ants, true bugs, and other spiders.

Males wander in search of mates during the summer and fall. Such journeys present many perils. Some wind up in the webs of house spiders *Achaeraenea tepidariorum*, and others may fall into window wells, swimming pools, and more.

Females seldom leave the security of their burrow, and for good reason: they are the much sought-after prey of the spider wasps *Priocnemis oregona* (Banks) and *Chirodamus pyrrhomelas* (Walker). It is not unusual to see these wasps trucking across the forest floor with spiders twice their size! In addition to avoiding predators herself, the female spider must guard her young. She attaches her disc-like egg sac to the wall of the burrow in the bottom half of the tunnel. She may plug the upper third of the burrow with soil for further protection (Males may close their burrows with silk during their final molt). If cornered in her lair, the female may rear back with fangs, pedipalps, and first two pairs of legs extended in a formidable pose.

¹ Modified from "Tarantulas in Oregon" by Eric Eaton.

This is one of thirteen species in the genus and it is known to occur throughout the Pacific Northwest, north to Alaska.



Fig. 1. The common Mexican red-legged tarantula often sold in pet stores. By R.D. Akre.



Fig. 2. A female Antrodiaetid, probably *Antrodiaetus pacificus*. By Brett M. Johnson.