

Spiders of Our Area

By Celeste Silling

This past week, I taught Summer Bird Camp at Gulf Coast Bird Observatory. But honestly, with all of the spider-loving kids in the group, it should've been called Summer Spider Camp. Even the children who started out as arachnophobes were asking to hold spiders by the end of the week. Every time we went outside, we found tons of awesome spiders to look at. It got me thinking about all of the arachnids in our area.

Texas is home to hundreds of different kinds of spiders and the vast majority are not harmful to humans. Two that have dangerous venom (and should therefore be avoided) are the brown recluse spider and the black widow.

Other spiders, like American grass spiders, have venom but are not dangerous to humans. This is because their venom is only harmful to the insects they are trying to catch. I got several spider bites this past week, and even though they all presumably injected their venom into me, I am not dead yet! In fact, the bites didn't even hurt or itch, they were so harmless. Other spiders tried to bite me, but couldn't because their fangs were too short or weak to even get into my skin. After we explained this to the kids, some of them would come up to me laughing with spiders in their hands saying "look, it's trying to bite me!"

One popular spider with the kids was the Spiny-backed Orb Weaver, also known as crab spider, smiley face spider, star spider, or Gregory Goblin. These are small, brightly colored spiders with spikes on their body. Despite its punk-rock appearance, this spider is not at all dangerous. The spikes are for protection against predators, and its venom is not dangerous to humans. These spiders are in fact beneficial to us humans because they prey on mosquitoes and other pests.

Another favorite spider was the Black-and-yellow Argiope. This one is easy to see, as it's huge (up to 1.5 inches) and has bright yellow markings. These are easily distinguished from other spiders by their trademarked zig-zag patterned web. Males court females by plucking at the strings of the web, making vibrations.

Finally, the spider that was most beloved by the campers was the Gold Orb Weaver, or Banana Spider. These spiders are huge. The ones we found at Gulf Coast Bird Observatory were up to three or four inches in diameter (including the legs). This, and their yellow-orange coloring made them easy for the kids to spot. Their webs, when you get up close, are golden silk and quite beautiful.

They can get their fangs in you, but it only hurts a little, like someone pulling on one of your hairs. The kids, once they discovered that these spiders couldn't hurt them, would let the orb weavers walk all over their arms and sometimes their heads. Some even named their spiders and brought them home with them (sorry parents!).

Spiders are amazing creatures and are often beneficial to humans. And if a bunch of kids can get over their fear of creepy crawlies, so can we all!

Photo by Celeste Silling. Caption: Summer Bird Camp attendee Jasmine Willoughby watches as a Golden Orb Weaver rests on her arm.