

## Desert Insects

An increase in bug activity is, of course, linked to the awakening of Spring. That said, a particularly interesting desert insect that I enjoy watching is the Tarantula Hawk. Resembling a giant wasp,  $\frac{3}{4}$ " in length, with velvety black body and orange wings, Tarantula Hawks can be seen flitting around low to the ground in a peculiar hopping manner. They are actually hunting, well, tarantulas or occasionally trapdoor spiders. Pay attention and you may witness the life and death drama of the wasp unfold before your eyes. Upon snagging its prey, the Tarantula Hawk stings the spider to immobility, then proceeds to bury the hapless, paralyzed spider alive with a packet of wasp eggs attached. The spider then becomes a perfectly preserved food cache for the hatching larva of the wasp. I don't know about you but, in my opinion, getting eaten alive by baby wasps would tend to ruin anyone's day.

Tarantulas, the prey animal in the aforementioned drama, are up to five times the size of their attacker. The high season for these large nocturnal arachnids comes later in the summer when the males start moving around looking for a mate. Only the males travel with any regularity, spurred on by hormones and love. (Sounds like some teenagers I know.) The females are more stationary and may live to be 20 years old. Tarantula venom is no more toxic than a bee sting and, by nature, Tarantulas are quite gentle creatures hardly deserving of the Tarantula Hawks depredations.

A discussion about insects in the desert would not be complete without devoting some of the conversation to another arachnid; the scorpion, a very old and successful group. Nothing in the insect world sparks quick movement like a scorpion somewhere in your living space. Immune to insecticides, the best way to keep these unwanted guests out is to keep their prey, crickets and other small insects, out as well. Scorpions have the unique ability to glow in the dark under ultraviolet light. Hunting scorpions at night with a portable black light, one might be surprised at how common they are in our undisturbed deserts. Only one species of the 30 or more found in Arizona is considered truly life-threatening; the Bark Scorpion.

There are so many other interesting insects that share this desert space with us, like the Giant Vinegarone, a  $3\frac{1}{2}$ " black crab-like creature that shuns light and lives under rocks. I will leave you with this one thought; even though we have a rather large number of unique bugs to watch, wonder, and even worry about, we do not have to put up with those pesky no-see-ums; chiggers, fleas, seed ticks and those hawk-like mosquitoes found in the wilds of Minnesota. I'll take a couple of scorpions anyday over a summer of itching and scratching with those guys.