

The Orb Weaver Spider

by Sally Cureton

To continue the discussion of spiders from last month, here are a couple of examples of spiders to be found locally. The **orb weaver spider** is one beautiful spider that a lot of people spot in their yards and it creates one of the most interesting webs around. It is also known as the black-and-yellow garden spider *Argiope*. The adult females have the beautiful black, white and yellow markings. If you have ever seen one of these, you will not forget it - it is absolutely gorgeous. It is not dangerous. The orb spider web is easily recognized by the zigzag formation of white silk, which they weave into it. Often it is a zigzag line through the center.

It was originally thought that this zigzag of silk was made to strengthen the web but some neat experiments have shown that its function is to advertise the presence of their web to birds allowing them to avoid it. Because the spider eats its old web before constructing a new one, destruction of the web by birds would lead to substantial protein loss. There is also a theory that suggests that the zigzag of silk attract insects because it reflects the ultra-violet radiation in the same way that flowers do.

This spider is fairly large, about an inch (20 mm) in length. She makes her orb-web in long grass near the ground. Their food consists of insects. The egg-sacs are large brown flask shaped and she hangs them in the web and guards until they hatch. She dies after the hatching of her eggs. The female often consumes the much smaller male after mating. This spider seems to prefer sunny sites with little or no wind and will drop to the ground and hide if disturbed.

Another common spider for all of us is the American House Spider, (*Achaearanea tepidariorum*.) The male is 1/8-1/4" (4-5 mm), and the female is 1/4" (5-6 mm). In color it is yellowish brown with an abdomen that is streaked and splotched with black and gray on sides. Its diet consists of insects. Which is why I guess I like having one or two around.

The American house spider web is irregular, made of sticky strands. These webs catch dust as well as prey and are known as cobwebs. The female spins pear-shaped brownish silken cocoon around egg mass and hangs it in the web. Adult females can live more than a year. This spider emerges in darkness to produce webs beneath ceilings or in window frames, taking advantage of every angle to set sticky strands where insects may get caught. Then the spider lies in wait on the part of the web that has an extra layer of silk.

I recently was privileged to see a monarch butterfly come out of its chrysalis. What an amazing site. The chrysalis is green with gold rings around it. When the butterfly emerges, what is left behind is a clear casing. When she emerges her wings are small and cupped around the abdomen. The butterfly spends the next hour or two pumping blood from her abdomen to the wings. We could actually almost see them becoming larger and larger. After she completed this process and rested, she was released to begin her journey south after feeding on milkweed. The monarchs that will reappear here next spring are not going to be the same ones that migrated south, but their offspring. They will reproduce on their wintering ground or after a short northward journey in the spring.

Memo to all hummingbird lovers. As you have noted, I am sure, they have left also. A few migrants were still being seen in the middle of October, but by now they should all be well south of here. Time to bring in those feeders and clean them out so they will be ready for next spring.

Happy gardening and wildlife watching!