

Name: _____

A Hairy Hunter

by Guy Belleranti

What hairy creature injects its prey with venom, then liquefies the prey's insides and eats the resulting "soup"? The world's largest spider, the tarantula, that's what.

Tarantulas live in underground burrows, in trees and on the ground in warm areas around the world. There are hundreds of species of tarantulas, with sizes ranging from 3 inches to a giant 12 inches.



Tarantulas are primitive spiders. They have been around for millions of years. They don't have the finer breathing tubes of other spiders, and their fangs point straight down instead of sideways.

Since a tarantula is a huge spider, you might predict that it spins a huge web. Actually, it has fewer spinnerets (the body part that makes silk) than other spiders. Instead of using silk for spider webs, tarantulas use their silk to make egg cases, for lining their nests and lining their underground burrows.

Like all spiders, tarantulas are carnivores. While most spiders can simply wait for food to get caught in their webs, tarantulas must go out hunting for food during the night. Insects, especially beetles and crickets, are among their favorite snacks. Some larger tarantulas can even eat frogs, toads, lizards and even small birds.

Tarantulas have eight eyes, but they don't see well. They also can't hear because they have no ears. Instead, they depend on their sense of touch. Their fine hairs are very sensitive and help them feel their way around.

When they grow, tarantulas push out of their hard outer skin, or exoskeleton. This is called molting. When they molt they can also replace some internal organs and even re-grow lost legs.

Tarantulas usually move slowly and deliberately. You don't have to worry that one will leap through the air at you. Because of their size they usually can't jump more than a few inches. Also, a fall from only a couple of feet can kill them. A tarantula can, however, make short hops to pounce on prey.

Birds, snakes, lizards and skunks are all predators of the tarantula. However, the most interesting tarantula predator is the female Pepsis wasp. Often called the tarantula hawk, this wasp stings the tarantula, then drags it down into a burrow, where it has made a nest. The tarantula hawk then lays a single egg on the spider. When the egg hatches the wasp larva feeds on the paralyzed tarantula.

Many people think tarantulas are poisonous. While they do have venom, it isn't very dangerous to most people. Their bite may hurt, but for most people it's only about as bad as a bee sting.

Even though the poison may not harm you, tarantulas have another line of defense. They have tiny barbed hairs on their stomachs and back legs that they can shoot at enemies when they feel threatened. These hairs can make enemies feel itchy and uncomfortable. So if you come across one, don't touch it. Just watch and enjoy it, but let it go on its way.

About the Author

Guy Belleranti works as a docent at Reid Park Zoo in Tucson, Arizona. The information in this article comes from his experiences working with animals and teaching others.

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1. If you wanted to see a tarantula in the wild, where might you look?

- a. in underground burrows in an area with a cold climate
- b. in webs that are spun in tall trees
- c. on the ground in an area with a warm climate
- d. in nests built in trees

2. What do tarantulas use the spinnerets for?

3. According to the article, what do tarantulas eat?

4. What is molting?

5. Which sense does a tarantula rely on most when it is hunting?

- a. sense of sight
- b. sense of hearing
- c. sense of touch
- d. sense of taste

6. Bill and Mary are learning about spiders in science class. Bill says tarantulas are poisonous. Mary says they're not poisonous. Their teacher tells Bill and Mary that they are both partly correct. Explain.

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Match each vocabulary word from the article with the correct definition.

_____ 1. deliberately

a. holes or tunnels dug by an animal

_____ 2. liquefies

b. poison

_____ 3. primitive

c. on purpose; not accidental

_____ 4. spinnerets

d. hooked; difficult to remove

_____ 5. burrows

e. ancient

_____ 6. internal

f. body parts that a spider uses to produce silk

_____ 7. barbed

g. turns into a liquid

_____ 8. venom

h. inside; within

◆ **Now try this:** Find all of the vocabulary words in the story and highlight them.

ANSWER KEY

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1. If you wanted to see a tarantula in the wild, where might you look? **c**

- a. in underground burrows in an area with a cold climate
- b. in webs that are spun in tall trees
- c. **on the ground in an area with a warm climate**
- d. in nests built in trees

2. What do tarantulas use the spinnerets for?

Spinnerets are used to make silk for webs, eggs cases, or lining nests.

3. According to the article, what do tarantulas eat?

According to the article, tarantulas eat beetles, crickets, frogs, toads, lizards, and small birds.

4. What is molting?

Molting is when an animal sheds its outer skin.

5. Which sense does a tarantula rely on most when it is hunting?

- a. sense of sight
- b. sense of hearing
- c. **sense of touch**
- d. sense of taste

6. Bill and Mary are learning about spiders in science class. Bill says tarantulas are poisonous. Mary says they're not poisonous. Their teacher tells Bill and Mary that they are both partly correct. Explain.

Tarantulas do have venom, but it isn't very dangerous to people. Their bite may hurt, but it's only about as bad as a bee sting.

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