

The Biggest Spider in Arkansas—the Tarantula

Texas Brown tarantula (*Aphonopelma hentzi*)

Family:

Theraphosidae (tarantulas) in the order Araneae (spiders)

Description:

This stocky, hairy species is Arkansas's largest spider. The body and legs are uniformly dark chocolate brown, with reddish hairs on the carapace. There are more than 50 species of tarantulas in North America, but this is apparently the only one native to Arkansas.

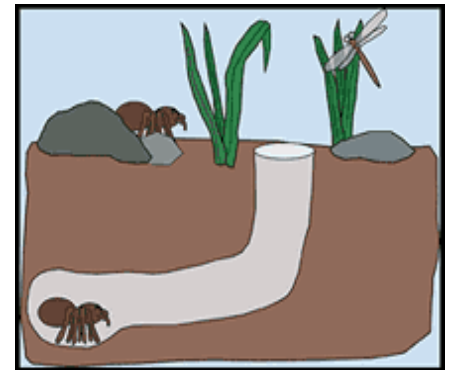


Size:

Length (not including legs): Females average 2 inches; males about 1 1/2 inches.

Habitat and conservation:

Tarantulas prefer dry rocky glades*, where they spend their days in silk-lined burrows in abandoned rodent or reptile tunnels or in other natural cavities. Like many hunting spiders, tarantulas are nocturnal, pursuing insects such as crickets. Tarantulas prefer areas seldom frequented by people. In late summer and fall, people in the uplands of Arkansas often see these large arachnids crossing roads.



Foods:

Tarantulas do not spin webs to catch their prey. They walk on the ground and grab insects that they encounter, or that walk past them. Like other spiders, they have fangs that deliver venom that both subdues their prey and helps digest it. Tarantulas are not aggressive to humans. The venom of tarantulas has no medical significance for most people, being something like a bee sting.

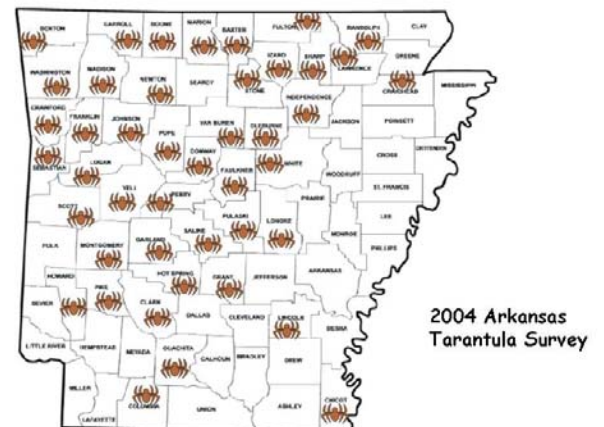


Distribution in Arkansas:

Occurs mainly in the western and northwestern (upland) areas of Arkansas, in appropriate habitats.

Status:

This species range extends from Kansas and Missouri south to Arkansas, Louisiana, Texas, and Arizona. It is common throughout its range and is not currently threatened. The ANHC conducted a statewide tarantula survey for Arkansas in 2004 to establish a baseline for tarantula habitat and population. The published results are available on the ANHC website.



*For details about glades, visit the "habitat" section of the education page on our website : <http://www.naturalheritage.com/Education/natural-communities-poster-series>

Life cycle:

Females secure their egg cases in silken webbing attached to the inner walls of their burrows, and guard their eggs until they are ready to hatch. The females then brings the egg sack out of the burrow and spins additional silk around the opening to serve a protection and a guide for the young spiderlings as they hatch.

Often, the young stay with the mother for about a week before dispersing. Most spiders live for only a single season, but tarantulas can potentially live for years. Females can live for more than 20 years, though males rarely live more than six or eight years.

To grow or increase in size, tarantulas molt their exoskeleton. The new exoskeleton may include regrown hairs and even new leg pieces.



old, molted exoskeleton

tarantula on its back, resting after molt (note the new white fangs which are soft and will harden and darken)