

Conservation Corner

By Corinne Peterson
Pocahontas County Naturalist



October 11, 2017

“Oh, what a tangled web we weave, when first we practice to deceive.” Sir Walter Scott

While we humans are known for our tangled webs of deception, tangled spiderwebs are just one of several types of webs spun by members of the spider family. As we look ahead to the Halloween Hike and *Spiders on the Trail*, let's focus our sights on the artful yet deadly spider web.

Spiders are the only arachnids that spin webs of silk threads. As spiders made the move from water to land, it is believed web building co-evolved with winged insects. The ability to make silk enabled the wingless spiders to hunt flying insects as well as protect their eggs and prey. Did you know a spiderweb preserved in amber was found in Sussex, England, dating to 100 million years ago during the Early Cretaceous Period?

The term spiderweb is often used for brand new webs, while old, dusty webs are often called cobwebs. The term cob doesn't derive from corn cobs, however, but from the archaic word *coppe* which meant spider.

Spiderwebs, like people, come in all sizes and shapes. Spiderwebs also contain up to 8 different sizes and textures of silk. By spinning webs to capture prey, spiders conserve energy normally used in hunting. They then eat their old webs to recapture some of the energy spent creating them.

It is the common house spider that weaves tangled webs. They first attach long, loose threads to a wall or window, a ceiling or corner, the bottom of a table or chair, before joining them together with threads going every which way.

Perhaps you've seen funnel webs in the grass spun by, you guessed it, the grass spider, who hides in the bottom of the funnel before dashing up and grabbing its meal. Platform spiders weave flat sheets in trees or shrubs. They also dangle a few threads above the sheet web to trip up flying insects who then land on the sheet web.

The ogre spider hangs from a branch while carrying a small web in its four front legs, while the bola spider spins a thread of silk with a sticky silk ball at the end to swing at unsuspecting insects.

The classic spider web, though, is spun by orb weavers such as the common garden spider. Their elaborate webs begin with a strong thread on which they hang the web, followed by outside threads and web spokes which are then interwoven with coils of sticky silk.

Traditional medicine includes the use of spiderweb gauze pads on wounds and cuts to help healing. Spider silk is high in Vitamin K, a known clotting agent. The first spiders to spin their webs in outer space did so aboard *Skylab* in 1973.

In closing, don't forget to call or email PCCB to reserve your spot on this year's hike. Hope you'll join us and a few *Spiders on the Trail* Saturday, October 21. What webs have you woven lately?

