



The Data

Scientific name: *Aphonopelma hentzi*

Common names: Oklahoma brown, Texas brown, Missouri brown

Size: 2-inch body, 4- to 5-inch diameter with leg span

Lifespan: 8–10 years for males, around 20 years for females

Colorado range: southern prairie from Kansas border west to the Front Range, including recent limited sightings south of Colorado Springs.

Commonly seen around Pueblo and in the Comanche National Grasslands, extending south and east to state borders

U.S. range: Colorado, Kansas, Missouri, New Mexico, Oklahoma, Arkansas, Texas, Louisiana

Interstate Love Song

Despite a chilling reputation, these grassland roamers are gentle giants just waiting to get lucky before time runs out.

By Amy Bulger

As the 100-degree days of summer start to relent across southeastern Colorado, the temperature change sets hordes of hairy bodies in motion on the Comanche National Grasslands near La Junta. Although these marauders look like giants (particularly to an arachnophobe), they weigh no more than a lightbulb and scurry quickly through brush and across roads, dodging weather, giant wasps and car tires.

It's a risky, nearly silent, wildlife stampede, spurred on in late summer and early fall by one of the world's timeless forces — the inescapable longing for love, the fiery desire to get lucky.

"People often don't realize what they're seeing," Steve Keefer chuckled. A district wildlife manager for Colorado Parks and Wildlife, he has worked with wildlife in southeastern Colorado since 1987. "If you're driving and see something that's kind of funny looking in the road, dark brown or black, odds are quite good that it's a tarantula this time of year."

Specifically, these are male tarantulas that have reached maturity. Around 8 years old, they leave the security of their burrows for the adventure of a lifetime. It's a final hurrah to search out a female who won't reject their advances, to look for that elusive thing called connection. The journey leaves them so depleted that most will die as winter takes hold.

Too many giant-spider horror films have assaulted the human psyche to turn this love quest into the next Nicholas Sparks novel. And the tarantulas are motivated by more than romance in rainstorms — they're participating in a ritual fine-tuned by ancestors for 240 million years, before the dinosaurs left their footprints in nearby Picketwire Canyon along the Purgatoire River.

WHAT'S GOING ON OUT THERE?

Drive east from Pueblo and the land quickly becomes semi-desert. Thick stands of trees lose foothold to shortgrass prairie choked with prickly pear, rabbitbrush, greasewood and cholla.

By day, jackrabbits pop like firecrackers from the brush; at night, scorpions hunt beneath the Milky Way. And the male *Aphonopelma hentzi* (it sounds like: a-fawn-a-pelma hens-eye), the most common of three tarantula species found in Colorado, roams the understory, feeling out vibrations, searching for love. When one comes across a burrow, he plucks silk strands of web at the entrance, like playing an instrument.

"He lets her know he's outside and he's interested. Is she interested? There's a little mating communication going on there," said Paula Cushing, the senior curator of invertebrate zoology at the Denver Museum of Nature & Science.

Though a fair amount is known about tarantula biology, there aren't answers for everything yet.

How many are out there? Hundreds or thousands?

How far do they roam? Maybe about 30 feet from their burrow? More?

District Wildlife Manager Steve Keefer and Arachnologist Paula Cushing offer tips on locating and enjoying tarantulas in southeast Colorado:

WHERE TO GO

Best spotting is south of the Arkansas River. Near La Junta, tarantulas can be seen along Highway 109, Highway 350 and the portion of the Comanche National Grasslands between those two highways, about 30 miles south of town. The grasslands offer car-accessible dirt roads and truck-ready two-tracks to explore. Highway 101 south of Las Animas and Highway 10 from La Junta to Walsenburg are also good alternatives.

these animals," explained Cushing, who is one of those 600. "We just don't have the manpower, so we are far behind fields like ornithology or mammology on understanding species distributions and population numbers."

Spiders aren't even on a wildlife biologist's radar, since the state manages only vertebrates, crustaceans and mollusks.

"Tarantulas are none of the above, so officially we don't have a lot of responsibility for them," Keefer said. Yet he knows a lot about them from working and living in prime tarantula country for more than 30 years. "Last year was unusual for numbers, there weren't as many. But the general trend I've been seeing is more, not fewer."

Two years ago, on a sunset drive home, Keefer counted more than 150 in the 80-mile stretch of Highway 350 between Trinidad and La Junta. Last year, during two days spent researching this story, I only saw about 10.

"The variability from year to year has to do with climate conditions and food resources more than anything," Cushing said, noting that recent sightings south of Colorado Springs — farther north than they've been seen before — may indicate their range is expanding due to changes in the climate. She's looking forward to documenting how and if that shifts.

Are there more or fewer than there used to be?

Does grazing, development or curious humans affect their ability to score?

The questions pile up, mostly because there aren't many people who can answer them.

"There are well over 100,000 species of arachnids and over 48,000 species of spiders on earth — and yet there are only about 600 professional arachnologists in the world to study

Fueled by increased media coverage the past couple years, more wildlife watchers are steering toward the grasslands to quench their curiosity about this instinctual event that might otherwise go overlooked during prime leaf-peeping season.

"I think we're going to see more traffic out here, and that's not a bad thing," Keefer said. "It's good for the community, good for people to get out in the outdoors, and it's good for them to think about critters they wouldn't normally think about."

CASHING IN ON GENTLE GIANTS

Not everyone is enamored by this hairy love story. For many, there's an uncomfortable edge, or downright fear, in being around hundreds of spiders. An annual report on phobias — analyzing fears Americans search for most on the internet — concludes that nearly one-third of us struggle with arachnophobia, about 100 million people.

It's a fear pop culture has cashed in on it repeatedly over the years, much to Keefer's chagrin. "Tarantula!" "The Giant Spider Invasion," "Arachnophobia," "Arachno-quake"; the list of films is long, and campy.

The popular 1977 cult horror "Kingdom of the Spiders" is one example that pits angry, swarming tarantulas against a young William Shatner. A night of turf warfare involving countless misrepresentations of tarantula biology and behavior — like their ability to cause car crashes and overtake a steer — brings an unforgettable ending. Spoiler alert: Shatner and crew survive, but the entire town has been covered in spider webs, the residents mummified within.

"That kind of deal actually does help color people's perceptions about these critters," said Keefer, who still fields questions about whether or not

tarantulas are aggressive. "People have that common fear already, and then throw in these movies and whatnot? I've had people quite frightened that this is a huge animal that's going to attack."

The truth about tarantulas is far less dramatic and, in many ways, stranger than fiction. The way they ambush and eat prey is decidedly less appetizing. It involves repeated puking stomach enzymes, dissolv-

WHEN TO GO

- Mating season can start in late August, but viewing peaks from mid-September to early October. Check weather websites and wait until daytime highs cool to 70s or 80s. For October trips, freezing night temperatures and a hard cold snap signal the spider show is over.

- Best viewing seems to be around dusk or dawn. A few will continue to roam throughout the day, but expect sightings to be slim.



A tarantula burrow

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Tarantulas have a 2-inch body, 4- to 5-inch diameter with leg span.

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When they reach maturity, at about 8 years of age, male tarantulas will leave their burrows in search of females.

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They aren't a threat to people; in fact they're quite fragile, gentle animals.

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Tarantula hawk wasps hunt tarantulas for a different purpose — as a host for their offspring.

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Grasshoppers are some of the favorite prey of tarantulas.



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Tarantulas are very fragile. Accidentally dropping one from 3 or 4 feet off the ground can kill it, so you should look but not touch.

Burrowing animals that live on the plains, including tarantulas, rodents and even wolf spiders, help keep the prairie healthy.



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SAFETY FIRST

- Pull off the road before flailing out of your vehicle to run after a spider. Watch for traffic and be considerate of other drivers.
- Wildlife watchers share the grasslands with hunters in the fall. Pronghorn hunting in the area begins in early October, so spider spotters should wear bright colors. Leave tan and white clothing at home or risk looking like a resident speed goat.

ing a carcass, and sucking the sticky mess back into their mouths. They aren't much of a threat to people, children or pets, Keefer explained; in fact they're quite fragile, gentle animals. Accidentally dropping one from 3 or 4 feet off the ground can kill it on impact.

Rather than promoting them as something to fear, city officials in nearby La Junta are using the unique opportunity to educate and attract visitors. The La Junta Chamber of Commerce, the Southeast Colorado Small Business Development Center and the La Junta Tourism office understand the potential.

"It's a big thing, and we're trying to make it bigger," said Susan Fisher, the La Junta Chamber's director of services. "There's some financial benefit

that comes to the city. But this isn't something that can happen everywhere, it's a unique thing that gets people to come out here."

Anticipating a rebound of the tourism industry, watch for more tarantula-focused events planned in 2021. Keefer hopes to join the agencies to assist with education programs, because ultimately, he said, "Helping people understand these spiders is a good thing."

MAKING CONNECTIONS

Traveling the plains daily, Keefer understands there's another connection at play, besides the one the spiders seek. Burrowing animals that live on the plains, including tarantulas, rodents and even wolf spiders, help keep the prairie healthy.

"Tarantula burrows help keep the soil fertile, provide nutrients and help the land absorb water. Without those holes, rains run off here since we tend to get heavy storms," he said.

Tarantulas also are predators, eating about anything they can catch, despite their poor eyesight. They offer grasshopper control for area farmers and eat beetles and other invertebrates, sometimes even taking on small rodents or lizards. In turn, they take their place in the food chain as prey for

a number of birds, mammals and other insect-eaters, including fox and coyote. But their ability to brush tiny barbed hairs from their abdomen into the face of a predator can make them a tough meal to tackle.

Their biggest adversary, the tarantula hawk wasp, hunts them for a different purpose — as a host for their offspring. Packing one of the most painful stings on the planet for a human, the 2-inch-long parasitoid wasp with vividly colored wings paralyzes a tarantula with a sting, drags it to the nest and lays an egg on it. The growing larva eats the spider alive. Too bad filmmakers don't put more effort into studying science.

Assuming these roamers successfully dodge wasps and predators on their journey for love, well, then there are cars to look out for.

Studies will eventually be able to answer how much of an impact humans have on tarantulas and other arachnids around the state. Cushing established the Colorado Spider Survey in 1999, a citizen science project empowering residents to gather arach-

nid specimens for a collection housed at the Denver Museum of Nature & Science. So far, over 30,000 specimens sent in document about 700 species of arachnids in the Rocky Mountain region, including these tarantulas.

East of Denver, on the open plains, it's hard to tell if development will have an impact on the tarantulas at all. "They're long-lived animals, but they're also very fecund. An adult female is producing probably well over 100 babies every year. So even if the population might be impacted by development, as long as there are some healthy individuals and healthy pockets of populations, the species should do OK," Cushing said.

Though their days of dodging dinosaur feet have now turned into close calls with car tires, the male tarantulas' instinct still draws them out to roam. They, in turn, draw people to the prairie, roamers among the roamers, to witness firsthand nature's impulse take hold.

"I think people should be encouraged, especially now when we're all stuck in our homes, to get out, drive down, enjoy those areas of Colorado," Cushing said. "Give those towns some business and appreciate the nature that is going on around us." 🐜

Amy Bulger is an outdoors writer and Colorado native. This article is copyrighted by the author.

SPOTTING STRATEGIES

- Stick to dirt roads or paved highways for starters, where spiders are easier to see. Tarantula hawks are also a sign spiders are near, as is a "tarantula jam" of cars alongside the road. Expect to see about a dozen or so in an hour spent searching.
- Stand still. A strategy used in big-game hunting can come in handy spotting the smallest of wildlife. Go into a field, focus on something mid-range and rest there. Being still helps you spot things moving in the periphery of your vision.
- Take a black light. Small scorpions are common in the area. They hunt at night, and will "glow" after dark — chemicals in their exoskeleton turn their bodies fluorescent under ultraviolet light. Stings can be painful — look, but don't touch.

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