



## The Black Widow Spider



Of all the spiders in the U.S., the black widow is perhaps the most feared. But just how dangerous is it? This brochure will help you understand what you might be up against.

### How Do You Identify a Black Widow Spider?

Most people are familiar with the **rounded black abdomen and red hourglass shape on female black widow spiders** (*Latrodectus mactans*). Their webs appear as a tangled mess that narrows into a funnel shape – an important fact to know, since they rarely leave them. What most don't know is that black widows are docile, preferring to escape harm than to attack. But, when it comes to defending their egg sacks or when cornered

they may bite. Male black widow spiders are harmless.

You are most likely to encounter a female black widow spider outdoors in dark, undisturbed areas such as around wood piles, under toilets, or fallen branches or in any other sheltered spot close to the ground.

### How Do You Know if You've Been Bitten?

When bitten, some people feel nothing initially, and others may feel a pin prick. After about 3 hours the pain can become intense. Victims might see swelling and two red spots where they were bitten. Pain usually progresses from there through the limb and into the abdomen and back. More serious symptoms include cramping, nausea, sweating, difficulty breathing, and vomiting.

In most cases symptoms disappear in two or three days. But in about one percent of cases, particularly in the very young and the elderly a black widow spider bite **is fatal**.

**If bitten, seek medical attention immediately. At Indiana Dunes National Lakeshore, call 1-800-PARKTIP, or notify a park ranger.**

### Proceed with Caution

It's difficult to completely avoid black widow spiders since they are found in almost every state in the U.S. But it is possible to protect yourself from their painful bites. While outdoors, look carefully before putting

your hands anywhere you can't see. Wear gloves whenever you're working outside or in your garage. At your home, seal crevices with caulk, increase light in areas where they may occur and remove brush piles and logs.

### So, What Good are They?

Spiders are critical for keeping the flourishing insect population in balance. Black widows are especially beneficial because they consume enormous numbers of cockroaches, grasshoppers and mosquitoes. Some medical researchers believe that the black widow's venom may help heart attack victims, by allowing their blood to flow more freely.

If we can overcome our fear of spiders we may find that they are often amazing and beautiful. For example, the black widow got its name because, after mating, the female will sometimes eat her mate! When leaving the sac spiderlings spin silk threads and float out on the breeze like kites. Even the web is interesting. Though it looks haphazard, as in much of nature, it has a purposeful design. Each of its three layers works together to trap prey, making it an extremely effective weapon.