

Huntsman Spiders

Fact Sheet



Grey Huntsman. Image: QM.

Introduction

Skipping lightly across your walls, scuttling about in your shower, or appearing suddenly from your car's visor, huntsman spiders are an arachnophobe's nightmare and an arachnologist's delight. To those who find them beautiful, they are welcome house guests: catching household pests in their evening wanderings, eyes sparkling in torchlight, and an ever-present part of our urban and bush fauna.

Biology and Appearance

Huntsman spiders have large, flattened bodies and long legs. Their leg joints are rotated backwards so the underside of their long legs face forwards. The underside of the last joints of their legs and even the very tips of the feet, bear a dense carpet of hairs. These hairy feet have a superb grip upon surfaces and upon prey. Eight small eyes are arranged in two neat rows of four. The Grey Huntsman, and the Green Huntsman (our largest species) both stretch up to 20 cm from leg-tip to leg-tip and are common around Queensland, but the largest huntsman in the world has a 30 cm span!

Huntsmen are readily-recognised by many people. Of the larger spiders, it is only huntsmen that can nimbly run up sheer vertical surfaces. Some large lanky-legged spiders have a superficially similar body appearance. The racing-stripe, or false wolf, spiders (*Miturga* spp.) are exclusively ground-dwelling and make extensive silken shelters under logs or bark. Giant water spiders (*Megadolomedes* spp.) are restricted to water bodies or areas immediately next to these. Giant Water Spiders can be distinguished by their exceptionally long feet.

Huntsman spiders are roaming hunters. Although they can produce silk they do not build silken retreats or web snares. They like sheltering in crevices such as under loose bark. They come out at night, roaming across tree trunks and over the ground in search of medium-sized prey such as cockroaches, caterpillars and moths.

The male spider is slightly smaller than the female but proportionally has even longer legs and a smaller abdomen. Like all spiders, the male can be recognised by his peculiar palps - the tiny leg-like appendages between the fangs and the first pair of legs. In males the tip of the palp is visibly swollen and bears structures used in mating. Mating in huntsman spiders tends to be long lasting, with one species recorded with a mating time of 10 hours! Female spiders are not aggressive towards their mates.

When the female is ready to lay eggs, she spins a silken pad onto which she lays several hundred blue-green eggs into a tough web sac. She will often guard this sac, responding aggressively if threatened (they are usually timid). Some huntsman spiders are social (*Delena* spp.), living in family groups of up to 300 individuals. These spiders show maternal care and even defend their colony from other spiders. *Delena* also starred in the horror film *Arachnophobia*.

Brown Huntsman spider *Heteropoda jugulans*

Brown Huntsman Spiders are mottled light brown and are often found in houses. Sometimes they leave their egg-sacs in pipes, and can be the cause of hundreds of young spiders appearing in bathrooms.



Brown Huntsman. Image: Robert Raven.

Badge Huntsman spider *Neosparassus* spp.

These huntsman spiders are so named for their 'shield' pattern of striking black, yellow, red, orange or white (usually 2-3 colours) hidden underneath their abdomen. The upper body is an even yellow-brown to fawn and the head is smooth and domed.



Badge Huntsman *Neosparassus* spp. Image: Garth May.

Green Huntsman spider *Typostola barbata*

Green Huntsman spiders are fawn-coloured rather than green. They do have green in their leg joints and this green colour may sometimes show through on the body. They may have paired black dots on the abdomen but are otherwise a handsome even colour. Characteristically, these timid spiders also have an orange 'moustache' – a distinct patch of hairs above and between the fangs.



Green Huntsman. Image: Steve Wilson.

Grey Huntsman spider *Holconia immanis*

These are large and hairy, with a chocolate-brown to black stripe extending halfway down their body with a flat head. Despite their size, they tend to be timid spiders.



Badge Huntsman. Image: Steve Wilson.

Effects of the bite

Many people fear huntsmen, but a few facts may help to improve their notorious reputation.

Firstly, people often report that huntsmen run at them aggressively. Egg-guarding females can be aggressive but they will not readily leave their egg-sac. Huntsman spiders that run towards you are excited and scared, and they are almost certainly scuttling in blind panic in no particular direction. Huntsman spiders will choose to flee instead of bite, but if handled they can deliver a painful nip.

It has been suggested that wandering male Badge huntsmen are more likely to bite, although these spiders are not commonly encountered. Often huntsman spiders running towards you are excited and scared. According to a recent survey of authenticated bites, the most frequent (40%) resulted from physically interfering with the spider (e.g. trying to catch it). Other common ways of being bitten were to pick up an item that had a concealed huntsman (19%) or by inadvertently putting on a huntsman along with a piece of clothing (17%). Huntsman bites have only minor effects: immediate local pain that subsides quickly and rarely lasts more than five minutes. This suggests that huntsman spiders do not actually use

venom in a defensive strike, and the pain is the result of their moderately large fangs.

Further Information

Raven, R. & Seeman, O., 2008. *Spiders of Greater Brisbane*. Queensland Museum, Brisbane.

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