Watch out for wrap-around SPIDERS!

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WRAP-AROUND SPIDERS certainly have the 'wow' factor. They may not be very big, but their ability to conceal themselves in plain sight is impressive. They are orb-weavers, of the spider family Araneidae.

Spiders, along with ticks, mites, scorpions, and pseudoscorpions, are arachnids (class Arachnida), most of which have the classic eight legs. But unlike insects, arachnids have neither antennae nor wings.

Scientists recognize 17 species of wrap-around spider,[1] all in the genus *Dolophones*, first described by Frenchman Charles Walckenaer in the 1830s.[2] They are mostly found in mainland Australia, but island species are known too, for instance in New Caledonia (east of Australia) and Indonesia's Maluku Islands (aka the Moluccas). However, as we will see, the right geographical location does not guarantee a sighting. While generally found up in the canopy of a tree, some people have observed males dispersing along the ground.[3]

As with many spiders, these critters show sexual dimorphism, which means that males and females are strikingly different in size, and sometimes in their shapes too. In the case of larger species of *Dolophones*, females are typically 8–9 mm long and males 4–6 mm. However, this sexual dimorphism is not as extreme as seen in other spiders in the Araneidae family, where some females may weigh a hundred times as much as the males.[4]

Masters of disguise

When resting during the daytime, these specialized spiders press their bodies against the bark-covered surface. This, together with their super-flat profile and mottled brown colouration, makes them very difficult to spot. And not just by curious humans! Resembling another creature or object, which can sometimes also cause you to blend in with your background, is a type of camouflage called *mimesis* (mimicry). This is a brilliant means of deceiving a host of visually orientated predators. Small mammals, bats, birds, frogs, toads, lizards, and even some invertebrates (e.g. ichneumon wasps) all consume spiders as part of their diet.[5]

The underside of the wrap-around spider's abdomen is actually concave, like an inverted dish. This helps it to spread out and flatten its body around the surface of a twig or small branch.[6] All wrap-around spiders exhibit this twig-hugging camouflage behaviour, but some have a body hump protruding from the otherwise flattened surface.[7] A few types of *Dolophones* are

nicknamed 'leopard spiders' because they sport prominent oval discs with slits in their centres, like the big cat's spots.

One thing is for sure, you need a keen eye to locate a spider that so cleverly masquerades as a part of a tree. Experts at Australia's national science agency CSIRO describe wrap-around spiders as "camouflaged so well they are almost impossible to discern."[8] Typical species, from the Brisbane area of Queensland, are *Dolophones conifera*, *D. pilosa*, and *D. maximus*. For those with eyes to see, the specialized anatomy and behaviour that makes such stunning concealment possible compels us to acknowledge the Maestro who made these arachnid masters of disguise.

Expert ensnarers

Like all orb-weavers, wrap-around spiders build webs to trap their prey, then immobilize these victims with a venomous bite. Their venom is not harmful to humans.[9] They are nocturnal predators, resting on twigs in their camouflaged position during the day, but skilfully capturing their food victims at night.[10] Scientists have found that, "after hunting by dangling earlier in the evening, if they are unsuccessful they weave web snares to capture prey for the rest of the night."[8]

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We are so familiar with spider webs that we can forget what remarkable constructions they are. The design of spider silk alone is amazing.[11] This presents evolutionists with the challenge of accounting for all the many sophisticated components, behaviours, and DNA programming involved. As Eric Cassell wisely observes in his excellent book *Animal Algorithms*, all such attempts have ended in failure: "A … fundamental challenge for those seeking to provide a detailed, causally credible explanation for the origin of silk and spiderweb architecture is the number of genes involved in producing silk and the complex genomes of spiders. … [So] one can be forgiven for concluding that we have no compelling reason to assume that a step-by-step evolutionary pathway … actually exists."[12] No wonder, for as we have seen with the masquerading abilities of wrap-around spiders, these silken constructions are evidence of ingenious design.

Wisely wrought

Don't let the naysayers of design hoodwink you, lest they entangle you in their web of deceitful evolutionary arguments. It is always good to make a detailed and thoughtful examination of the creatures we see around us, but to do so while keeping the teaching of Scripture in mind. In the case of creepy crawlies we read, "God made … everything that creeps on the ground according to its kind. And God saw that it was good" (Gen. 1:25). These inconspicuous-but-wonderful wrap-around spiders definitely qualify as exquisitely and artfully designed creations of God. Not all of us are fond of spiders. 'That's putting it mildly', some might say! But Christians must surely all agree: the All-wise Creator deserves to be praised for what He has wrought—the Maker of wrap-around spiders is *the* true virtuoso! ■

References and notes

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