



Red-Back Spiders

1 Imagine it's just the beginning of summer and you've decided to play a game of cricket. All you need is your cricket bat, which has been sitting unused in the shed for months. You scramble through the dusty clutter. Suddenly, you feel a really sticky web around your hands. You pull away quickly. It feels like something has stung you. Beneath the junk, a frightened female red-back hides in her web. Before you freak out too much though, it might be a good idea to learn a bit more about these creatures.



- 2 Red-backs (known to scientists as *Latrodectus hasseltii*) are widow spiders. They have this name because the females are fond of eating their male partners. Widow spiders are found almost everywhere in the world. Red-backs are the main type of widow spider in Australia. They live everywhere except for the coldest mountain areas.
- 3 The type of red-back to worry about has a body like a large black or dark-brown pea. A red or orange stripe runs along its abdomen.

A spot of the same colour is on its underside. This is a female. Its body is about 10 mm long and it has slender legs. Although non-aggressive, females will bite if you disturb them. A female's venom will make you very sick and can even kill you.

- 4 The male is about 3-4 mm long. It has a light-brown body and white markings. Males are much smaller than females. Their fangs are too small to give much of a bite to humans.

Red-backs are found in bushland, in logs, under rocks and bark and sometimes in thick shrubbery. They also like living alongside people, especially around the outside of houses.

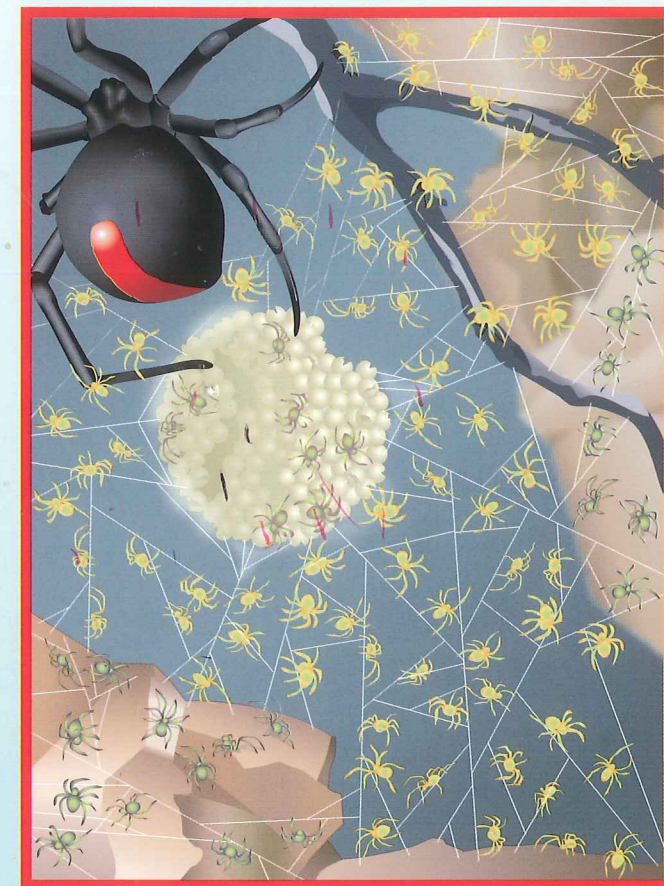
- 5 Red-backs choose a sheltered spot to build their webs. These are the stickiest, messiest things you can imagine! The nest, where the eggs are found, is in the cool, dark inner part of the web. Sticky snare lines reach outwards from this to trap a red-back's prey.

- 6 Insects make up most of the red-back's menu. Red-backs will also eat small lizards, frogs, beetles and even other spiders. When its prey is entangled in a sticky snare, the spider binds it up in silk, carrying it to the centre of the web for dinner. Here, the red-back bites its victim and squirts digestive juices into it. The spider can then suck its victim dry. Females often steal prey from other red-back's webs.

- 7 The male doesn't make his own web. Instead he sits on the outside of the female web, feeding on smaller insects. It's a risky business and he has to be fast enough so that he doesn't end up as prey!

- 8 Unfortunately, being widow spiders, the male red-back has a pretty short life. Luckily for the species, he lives long enough to mate. To get her attention, the male shows the female his abdomen. What follows is a very acrobatic process during which the female injects her digestive juices and slowly eats him! Most males do not survive the mating process.

- 9 After mating, the female can lay several batches of eggs over the next two years. She produces about ten egg sacs, which she hangs in her web. Each sac contains up to 250 eggs. Tiny green spiderlings hatch within a few weeks. The wind disperses these along threads of silk to find another nest.



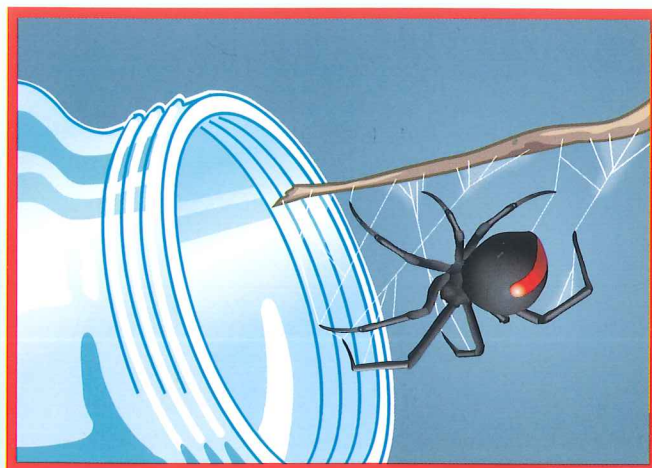
10 So how can you tell if that sting is really a red-back bite? Well, the bitten area will become red and tender, swelling up. You will start to sweat and, as the pain spreads, you may feel weak and sick in the stomach. After some time you will start to shiver. You may even get a headache and feel clumsy.

11 Don't panic! The red-back spider's venom can take hours before its full effects are felt. The best thing to do is to apply an ice pack to the bite. This will relieve the pain. Don't apply a pressure bandage, as the venom is slow spreading. Pressure will make the pain worse.

12 Get an adult to collect the spider so doctors know exactly what bit you. Normally poking a stick into the web and wrapping the silk

around it is enough to remove the spider. It will survive in a glass jar until you can get medical help.

Now, calmly head off to the hospital or medical centre to receive medical attention. Antivenene is available for the red-back bite.



Questions

1 Why are red-backs called widow spiders?

- a Females lay eggs in sacs.
- b Females eat their male partners.
- c Females are larger than males.

2 A male red-back's fangs are

- a too small to harm humans.
- b red or orange in colour.
- c used for web-making.

3 A red-back's nest is

- a the stickiest, messiest thing ever.
- b found at the centre of the web.
- c never used to trap prey.

4 After mating the female can

- a lay eggs for up to two years.
- b capture insects.
- c build a web.

5 You've just been seriously bitten by a red-back spider. There are three spiders in the nest. Which one bit you?

- a the green one
- b the brown and orange one
- c the brown and white one

6 Antivenene will prevent a bite victim becoming

- a panicky.
- b sweaty.
- c seriously ill.

Vocabulary

Find words in the text that match the meanings below. The word is in the section shown in brackets.

- 7 A major part of a spider's body (3)
- 8 Got caught or trapped in (6)
- 9 To be flexible and agile (8)
- 10 To continue to live (8)
- 11 Uncoordinated (10)

Grammar

You'll is the contraction of *you will*. Join the words below to form contractions. Write the word.

- 12 **does not**
- 13 **do not**
- 14 **you have**
- 15 **it is**

Back To The Text...

16 In which part of the library would you find this text?

- a fiction
- b non-fiction

17 Another good name for this text would be:

- a Widow Spiders
- b Busy Spiders

18 The writer encourages anyone that has been bitten to

- a hurry to the hospital.
- b remain as calm as possible.

Think About This

19 Look back through the card to find what happens first. Choose **a** or **b**.

- a The male feeds off the edge of the web.
- b The male shows the female its abdomen.

20 The word *snare* in section 5 means

- a home.
- b lair.
- c trap.
- d nest.

21 Look at the illustration on page 2. What will happen next?

- a The female will inject the male with digestive juices.
- b The wind will blow the spiderlings away to another nest.
- c The female will now lay a batch of eggs.

22 The illustration on page 3 shows

- a a red-back making a nest in a jar.
- b a red-back soon to go to the hospital.

23 The illustration on the front of the card is described in section

- a three.
- b five.
- c seven.
- d eleven.

Challenge Option

Writing: Write a short poem about spiders.

