

Making Ripples

Fantastic Beasts of Northwest Arkansas

by Amanda Bancroft

It's often said that we fear what we do not understand. Learning about some of our fanged friends and native neighbors can help assuage our fears when confronted with one. Although there are certain facts about what we fear which actually make it scarier, at the same time, these critters are cool and a healthy dose of respect and knowledge can go a long way to keeping us safe.

Tarantulas are so badass that they can dig their underground burrows with their fangs (if they're not using someone else's burrow instead). Because even short falls can cause major injury in the tarantula's exoskeleton, they have retractable claws which help them firmly grip surfaces in order to climb trees and other structures. When threatened, a tarantula rubs its abdomen, creating a cloud of barbed hairs that can lodge into an attacker and cause irritation and a rash (and a slightly bald tarantula). Despite their threatening appearance, many people keep them as docile pets and some people eat them, claiming that they taste like peanut butter.

Tarantulas rarely bite people because they see us as large predators, and their venom feels no worse than a bee sting unless you're highly allergic. Copperhead snakes, on the other hand, are the most likely of any of our native snakes to bite. No worries; their bites are rarely fatal to humans because they have relatively mild venom. They are pit vipers (notice the shape of the head) and are gorgeously patterned with what appear to be Hershey's kisses, but don't eat these! Copperheads have vertical pupils just like cats do. They can detect differences in their surrounding temperature in order to strike where it's hottest: usually, at an attacker or potential prey.

They can be found in a wide range of habitats, as long as there is sunlight and cover. Scorpions are flexible in their home requirements, too, and our resident bark scorpions can be found anywhere from rock crevices to trees to dark closets. They have such sensitive hairs that they can pick up on vibrations in the air! Just like tarantulas, they're active nocturnal hunters. They may seem small but they can live up to six or more years. Female bark scorpions carry their live young around on their back until their first molt.

Sometimes even very cute critters seem scary. Many people are afraid of mice, but once we get to know them, they aren't so bad. Deer mice are common in our area, and are so named because their fur and bounding jumps resemble that of a deer. They're inquisitive and go exploring for food at night, helping keep forests healthy by eating insects that are harmful to trees.

This Halloween, pick a native critter that you find spooky, and learn something cool about it. Rent a documentary, attend a lecture, or read a book about them. Your chosen creature might make a great costume, too!

Amanda Bancroft is a Master Naturalist and volunteers with her husband Ryan for their solar-powered online educational center on how to make a difference with everyday choices at: www.RipplesBlog.org.