

MANGALURU

Rock tarantula sighted in Puttur



Govind D. Belgaumkar

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The tarantula spider which has been spotted at Directorate of Cashew Research, Puttur. photo: By Arrangement

Senior Scientist Mr. Raviprasad said the rock tarantula has black cephalothoraxes and has black hair except at the tips of the legs. Eight pale eyes occur as a compact group, situated on a slightly elevated tubercle.

Scientists at the Directorate of Cashew Research, Puttur, recorded the sighting of the rare rock tarantula spider in Puttur. The nocturnal creature has eight eyes.

The researchers, T.N. Raviprasad, Srikumar K.K., and P.S. Bhat of the research centre, and Sebastian P.A. of Division of Arachnology (study of spiders), Department of Zoology, Sacred Heart College, Thevara, Kochi, recorded the sighting of a female rock tarantula in June in cashew plantations of the research centre in Puttur near here.

Senior Scientist Mr. Raviprasad said the rock tarantula has black cephalothoraxes and has black hair except at the tips of the legs. Eight pale eyes occur as a compact group, situated on a slightly elevated tubercle. The eye pattern of spiders helps in identification of the family to which they belong. The abdomen is black, longer and elongated oval in shape, covered dorsally with black hair. On the end of each leg, surrounding the claws is a group of hair called "scopula".

These help the tarantula to grip better when climbing smooth surfaces such as glass or porcelain tiles. The spiders temporarily stay in burrows under stone, dead logs, or below laterite blocks and hunt in the vicinity. Entrance to their burrows is decorated with thick silk webbing.

Dr. Raviprasad said that although previously sighted in the Western Ghats of Karnataka, the rock tarantula (*Annandaliella albolimbatus* sp.nov) was an extremely rare species, which was identified by Mr. Sebastian. *Annandaliella* is a genus of tarantulas endemic to India.

Mr. Raviprasad said that tarantulas mainly prey on insects and other arthropods using ambush as their primary method of hunting. The size of these rare spiders ranged from as small as a fingernail to as big as a dinner plate. Depending on the species, the body length of tarantulas ranges from 2.5 cm to 10 cm, with 8 cm to 30 cm leg spans (from the tip of the rear leg to the tip of the front leg on the opposite side).

The largest species of tarantula can weigh over 85 grams. The biggest tarantulas can kill prey as large as lizards, mice, birds, and small snakes.

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Shy creatures

Tarantulas were generally shy and peaceful spiders that would bite only if provoked, according to Mr. Raviprasad. People need not panic by their hairy look. When threatened, the tarantula may try to rub the top of its abdomen with its legs to release a cloud of stinging hair at its enemy. The hair can cause an itchy rash, irritation to the eyes, nose, and skin, and affect lungs and airways if inhaled.

He said they played an important role in ecological balance by feeding on insects. They should be captured if sighted in a glass bottle and released in vegetated areas. Their venom is not fatal to humans and their bite generally is no more painful than a minor puncture wound.