

## Backyard Briefs

*A weekly column*

*By Judy Jessop, A Nature Conservancy Volunteer*

At this time of year you can feel the whisper of change. The night continually steals minutes from the day, yet there is still the intensity of a burning summer sun. Have you noticed how much spider silk seems to reach for you on a wooded walk? My garden seems filled with dew-jeweled webs each morning. Many brightly colored garden spiders are very large now and spinning ever-larger webs. They seem to know their time is short, that fall is pushing forward, even if summer is reluctant to leave.

There are many different kinds of spiders that spin different types of webs, but the true artist among them is the orb-weaver. This rather large family of spiders spins sticky spiral webs. If you have access to the Internet see how orb spiders weave their web at this address. <http://www.unibas.ch/dib/nlu/staff/sz/movie.html>

Orb weavers have poor vision so they locate prey by feeling vibration and tension on the threads of the web. This is their cue to zip out and quickly wrap the victim, putting it out of its misery with a bite. Then the tidy bundle is hauled to a favorite spot to eat. Depending on the kind of spider, this place is either in the center of the web, in a corner, or under a leaf at the edge of the web.

Orb-weavers mate in late summer. When male spiders go courting they do a bit of preparation first. The sperm is produced in the abdomen but the male spider must build a special small "sperm web," put his sperm in it and then carry the package in his palps (small leg-like appendages between the mouth and first legs). Once properly equipped, he goes off in search of a mate. Because of poor vision, orb males announce their approach by plucking the strands of a female's web to signal his approach.

A week or so after mating the female spider deposits several hundred eggs in a silken sack. Much of her energy, in these final days of summer, is expended on her descendents. Depending on the type of orb-weaver, the eggs will either hatch within a few weeks, or not until the following spring. Either way the art of web building must wait for the lengthening days of spring to return.