

Backyard Briefs

A weekly column

By Judy Jessop, A Nature Conservancy Volunteer

We were kneeling in our garden, under some pines, planting bulbs that were plump and healthy, promising nodding daffodils come spring. Wishing for my hat I sat back on my heels, pulled off gloves and ran my fingers through unruly hair. My rough finger comb dislodged what appeared to be a piece of bark. It looked and felt like pine bark except it had beautiful white lichen on one side, in a triangular shape. I showed it to my husband and he agreed that the pattern of the lichen was quite unusual and beautiful. I took it inside and laid it on a kitchen towel while washing my hands and getting started on lunch. As I reached for the towel imagine my surprise to find that my pretty piece of bark had sprouted eight legs and a spider now perched in the folds. What a marvelous adaptation—this spider's clever defense, of tucking in and looking like bark, was a trick so effective that even close examination did not give her away.

Spiders have other adaptations depending on how they live. Web building spiders have poor vision, but an excellent sense of touch. The sense of touch is more important because they catch their prey in a web; vibration signals the presence of a good dinner that cannot run away. Web builders hang their egg sacks on their web and often die before the spiderlings emerge. The tiny spiders often disperse by letting out silk until they are lifted and carried on the breeze.

Wolf spiders live very different lives. They are more like nomads wandering far and wide in search of food. Since they hunt, instead of using a web to capture food, they have developed excellent eyesight. A female wolf spider has no web upon which to hang her egg sac, so she simply carries it with her attached to her belly. Once the spiderlings hatch they will spend the first week or so riding on their mother's abdomen. During this time they are under mom's protection, and, as they mature enough to leave, they simply drop to the ground and are dispersed as their mother wanders far and wide.

I recaptured my piece of bark turned spider, carefully placing her back in the garden. May she capture many pesky bugs that chew on my flowers and shrubs.