

# on the tarantula trail //

This fall, get up close and personal with **Mount Diablo's resident spiders.**



by **LEEANNE JONES**

illustration by **ESTHER AARTS**

I'll chase butterflies or cup a praying mantis in my hands. I've been known to save earthworms from drowning in puddles and even to refer to bumblebees as cute. But spiders? Spiders are not OK.

Maybe it's the eight legs. Or the pincers. Or that I couldn't get a good night's sleep for a week after seeing *Arachnophobia* on the big screen. Whatever the reason, I've never wanted to touch—or even be within a couple feet of—a spider.

Which is why I was met with a few raised eyebrows last fall, when I announced to my family that I had registered for a Tarantula Trek hosted by the Mount Diablo Interpretive Association. My father and husband had heroically slain many hairy garden spiders and spindly daddy longlegs for me over the years. Now I wanted the guys—along with my mother and sister—to join a two-hour hike for the express purpose of seeking out giant arachnids.

But I'm a sucker for new experiences, and a tarantula hike on Mount Diablo was one of the few autumn traditions I hadn't crossed off the East Bay to do list. Plus, as the saying goes, the only way to overcome fear is look it in the eyes—in this case, two rows of four eyes.

When I arrived at Mitchell Canyon Visitor Center, on the Clayton side of Mt. Diablo State Park, it was clear that I was a late bloomer—and a wimp. Dozens of families gathered for the hike, most with young kids



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who were giddy with excitement. Perusing exhibits on geology and wildflowers, they stopped to marvel at a spider specimen encased in glass.

Naturalist Ken Lavin, who has been leading these hikes for 15 years, confirms it is the adults who are most apprehensive. "The kids are pretty amazing. They think, Well, once one kid gets close, I will follow," he says. "But everyone has an innate fear of spiders: I think it's in our DNA. It took me several years. I'd always cringe, but I'm used to them now."

Volunteer guides divided the crowd into four groups and launched into Tarantulas 101. The brown variety native to Mount Diablo spends most of its life hidden in burrows. But in late September through October, the mature males come out to mate. Just after sunrise and before sunset, tarantulas can be spotted scurrying across the hiking trails looking for love.

As our guide spoke, the other groups began ascending the trail one by one. Before the last was out of sight, commotion erupted, with everyone rushing to huddle near one side of the trail. They had spotted the first spider of the afternoon.

As we watched from afar, our guide assured us that while some tarantulas can kill mice and birds, the Mount Diablo crawlers prefer small insects such as crickets and beetles. And the venom is harmless to humans, only causing pain or discomfort. The spiders would rather flee from a menace.

The group ahead moved on, and we caught up to the tarantula, who was still wandering slowly and aimlessly on the side of the trail. As the kids closed in, our guide gave handling instructions. We could place our hands on the ground in the tarantula's path to let it walk across. ("They have bad eyesight," Lavin told me later. "They don't know you from a log.") But we were to avoid lifting the spider off the ground, as a fall from even a small height could kill it.

The kids got on their knees in the dirt and followed the spider around. I leaned in for a closer look, catching brief glimpses of its long hairy legs crawling over little fingers. Occasionally, it would pause, and I could see that its front legs had clawlike hooks. Lamely, I stuck my arm into the tangle, just to snap photos with my cell phone.

Another tarantula was spotted a few feet ahead, and our group separated. Then

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another. After a while, families broke off and continued up the trail alone, hoping for a solo find. Everyone wanted quality time with the next spider.

As the sun began to slip behind big oaks and bats zoomed silently overhead, we scanned the sides of the trail for movement. After an hour, we had come across only one spider, but it was dead. According to Lavin, these tarantulas will wander around mating until they perish—stepped on by a hiker, run over by a car, eaten by a predator, or simply starved, as they will never return to the safety and food-trapping webs of their burrows.

With daylight fading quickly, we decided to turn around and head back. My apprehension gave way to disappointment, as I realized I may have missed my chance at bravery. But halfway down the trail, we came across a mother and daughter gently prodding a spider.

My mom, a gardener quite familiar with bulbous orb-weaver spiders, eagerly jumped in. She smiled broadly, delighted at the tarantula's ticklish feel as it danced between her fingers. It didn't look so horrible. I watched for a while and mustered up courage. Finally, I extended a shaking hand.

The tarantula's feet and belly were surprisingly soft and light, and as it moved across my hand, I relaxed. It felt like a small fuzzy mammal, a hamster maybe. Occasionally, the spider would change direction and charge up my arm, and I'd panic a little but guide it back safely to the ground, one hand in front of the other. I named him Stanley.

Among the last to approach? The guys. My old heroes. My dad and husband stood back, turning down several invitations before finally touching the spider.

We hung out with Stan for 20 minutes, before steering him toward the bushes and heading back to our car. As soon as we got out of the park and into good cell phone reception, we uploaded the photos to Facebook. As evidence. And our virtual badges of courage.

*Mount Diablo Interpretive Association hosts Tarantula Treks October 1 and 15, 4–7 p.m. Reservations required, \$6 park entrance fee per car, [mdia.org](http://mdia.org). Lindsay Wildlife Museum hosts Tarantula Hikes October 15 and 23, 4:30–7 p.m. Reservations required, \$15–\$20, [wildlife-museum.org](http://wildlife-museum.org). ■*