

## **Family: Learn the truth about tarantulas, look for them on a hike**

Paul Kilduff

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Now is the perfect time to consider the tarantula - and not just because it fits in with the Halloween motif. It's tarantula mating season, and the males are out crawling around various East Bay parks looking for love. While they may appear scary, there's actually nothing to be frightened about.

Naturalist Cat Taylor promises to dispel some common misconceptions about the hairy spiders, known as the California brown tarantula, at a talk on Saturday. Then, it's off on a hike to find them.

First thing to remember: They are not poisonous and rarely bite. If they do, it feels more like a pinprick and it won't send you to the emergency room as a brown recluse or black widow nip could.

"It's very difficult to get them to bite," says Taylor, who points out that the tarantula's main form of defense is to perform what's called urtication, in which the arachnid flicks hairs off its abdomen that can sting and itch, Taylor says. To help explain the spider's anatomy, Taylor will have an assistant on hand dressed up as a tarantula.

Taylor will also have a couple of real spiders that she will allow those brave enough to handle gently. She describes the appropriate handling method as one where "you're just a rock and they're walking over your hand." In the end, she says, they feel "more like hamsters. . . . They're light and they tickle like pipe cleaners crawling across your hand." So you know: The age limit for tarantula handling is 3 because younger kids tend to fling the creatures.

Taylor says she became fascinated with tarantulas when one moved into her tent while she was working as an archaeologist in Central America. She decided to educate people about tarantulas when one night at a campfire she was hosting at Del Valle, a guy came up to her and proudly announced that he'd killed 10 of them. "These programs allow me to teach people to get over their fear of tarantulas," says Taylor, who speaks at schools and science clubs.

Unlike their smaller spider cousins that catch their prey in a web, tarantulas spend most of their time hanging out by their dens waiting to pounce on insects. The males can live to the ripe old age of 10 while females can go past 20. But it's not an easy life. When the spiders are born the first danger they face is being eaten by their 200 or so hungry siblings.

Then there's the challenge of molting, where they literally have to pull themselves out of their skin. Sometimes they get trapped and die. Tarantulas also have to be on the lookout for predators such as the tarantula hawk wasp, which paralyzes the spider with a sting and lays eggs on it. When the young hawk wasps hatch they feast on the still-living tarantula.

The males lead an especially dangerous lifestyle. While they crawl around during mating season they can be run over by cars, and often after hooking up with the female she'll thank him by eating him. "This happens a lot in the spider world because the females are larger and the male makes a good protein meal," Taylor says. Now that's spooky!

9-10:30 a.m. Sat. Free. Del Valle camp- ground and amphitheater. (925) 862-2601.  
[www.ebparks.org](http://www.ebparks.org).

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<http://sfgate.com/cgi-bin/article.cgi?f=/c/a/2007/10/25/NS7TSRGMD.DTL>

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