

FEATURES

Our amazing spiders are caught in a web of misunderstanding despite all their mind-blowing ecology. Now is a great season for spider spotting. Voice naturalist Alex Morss shares some spider love

IN AUTUMN, I often stare in awe at our spinning, stalking, scurrying, parachuting, ballooning, leaping, toiling silk artists. Dew catchers that decorate the dawn and transform light into diamonds, flower ticklers, aerial engineers, house cleaners and, towards their prey, magnificent marvels of menace*.

Spiders are incredibly industrious creatures, serving nature and us with useful ecosystem jobs, being the meaty menu of many food webs, also offering natural pest control, and in between inspiring many a construction engineer, scientist

Forget the fear – spiders are our friends, and Bristol has some real beauties

and artist. I realise a few folk recoil at the idea of sharing their home or even the garden with spiders and might opt for pesticides instead of welcoming nature's harmless predators



WILDLIFE WATCH

Spider-Man character, but he is missing. "Ah, he's a bit lame really isn't he?" teases Garth Bushell in a whisper, children safely out of ear shot. This family are more into the sci-fi world of Children of Time, an award-winning book starring giant alien spiders, by Adrian Tchaikovsky.

"Some people comment when they walk in that we still have our Halloween display up, but it's like this all year," he grins.

Garth's fiancée Heather Iles even has a spider engraved inside her engagement ring, beside the word 'love'. Evidently a gifted seamstress, she knits, weaves, crochets and sews

huge spiders in all shapes, colours and sizes, with a big dollop of humour, each one given an affectionate name. The spider theme is threaded through clothes, crockery, furnishings and memorabilia, and even the family camper van.

"People do comment on the amount of spiders," says Heather. "I made Garth some leg warmers for his spider, for his birthday. As soon as I'd made eight leg warmers for one spider, all the others needed them!"

Garth admits: "I have a rather large collection of toy spiders. I pretty much buy every one that comes out! I also have an amazingly creative partner. I think Heather has made me over 15 spiders."

What about real spiders? "We love them, the kids love them," cheers Heather. "At school there was a spider in the classroom and some of the kids were shrieking, but Freddie went up, grabbed it and popped it outside."

Garth added: "I started liking spiders from an early age. I felt it unfair that such a useful animal should be so maligned. I think the most amazing thing about them is their webs.

"Now is a great time to go in to your front garden or park early in the morning and see if you can find a cross spider, *Araneus diadematus*. They may be busy building a web – watching the construction and care put into this just astounds me. The strength and durability of spider silk blows me away and humans haven't even got close to

indoors. Yet none of Britain's 650-ish native spider species can give us more than a nip.

Yet this fear can be so ingrained, it feels deeply primitive and incredibly challenging to many people. So I invited Bristol residents to share their spidery sightings and tales. I was flooded with spider fan replies and not one was negative! And I reckon I've found the centre of the web of love, in Totterdown.

Swaying softly in the shrubs, a few silvery silks flicker in the lustre of autumn light, as I approach an ordinary-looking Victorian house in Knowle. But it's quickly apparent that I am facing hundreds of pairs of eyes. Giant creatures with rainbow-coloured leg warmers. Big fluffy arachnids woven in needlecraft, stuffed ones and Lego ones, stained glass arthropods and origami crab spiders. Then some four foot harvestmen or daddy-long-legs** threaten to upstage it all.

A tall, friendly looking man beams out from behind a spiderweb stained-glass window, holding an oversized webby mug and wearing a T-shirt covered in curious arachnid faces, each flamboyantly sporting several pairs of eyes. (Spider eyes help us to identify them: they generally have eight eyes, but sometimes they have 12, 6, 4, 2 or even none.)

We wander into a lounge smothered in dangling, furry, woolly and hairy legs. I half expected to see the iconic

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Bristol
City Hall,
College Green

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mulled wine and more!