

The Jungle in My Garden

by Dr Simon Pollard

I know a lot about spiders. You could say I'm a spider expert. I think they are amazing creatures, and I travel all over the world looking for them. I write about spiders (and about insects as well), and I take photographs of them.

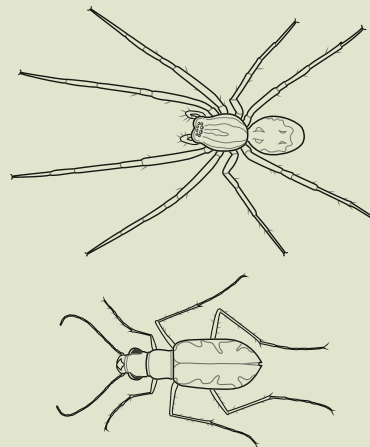
Spiders and insects are mostly very small, but with my photos I can make them look much bigger, as you will see in this article.



Do you know that spiders and insects are not the same?

There are two easy ways to tell them apart.

1. A spider has eight legs, and an insect has six legs.
2. A spider's body has two parts, and an insect's body has three parts.



Some spiders and insects live in jungles. A jungle is an exciting place. When you imagine what a jungle is like, you might picture creatures like monkeys and tigers and other wild animals, but I'm more interested in the spiders and insects. To me, my garden is just as exciting as a jungle.

In any garden, there are thousands of insects and spiders, but they're usually hard to see unless you look carefully. There is something special about each one, and just like wild creatures in the jungle, they all have to eat to live.

Let me tell you about some of the spiders and insects in my garden ...



Aphids

Aphids are insects that live on leafy plants, such as roses, fruit trees, and vegetables. An aphid has a mouth that looks like a straw, and it uses it to suck the sap from new leaves. This harms the plants and can even kill them. We think of insects such as aphids as pests because they eat plants that we like.

Aphids

An aphid - actual size



A ladybird eating an aphid

Ladybirds

Fortunately for us, some insects, such as ladybirds, like to eat aphids. A ladybird is a non-stop eating machine. It can eat up to fifty aphids in an hour.

Ladybirds eat aphids, but what eats ladybirds? Ladybirds are easy to see because they are brightly coloured. You might think that birds would eat them. But ladybirds taste bad to birds, so when a bird sees a ladybird, it leaves it alone. Ladybirds are safe from birds, but they are not safe from spiders ...

Spiders

Spiders eat insects – crawling insects, scuttling insects, and even flying insects. But spiders can't fly, so how can they catch flying insects?

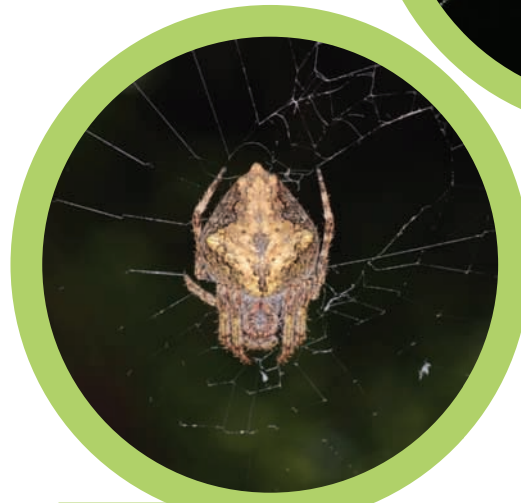
Some spiders catch insects in webs

A lot of spiders build webs to catch insects. These webs catch flying insects as well.

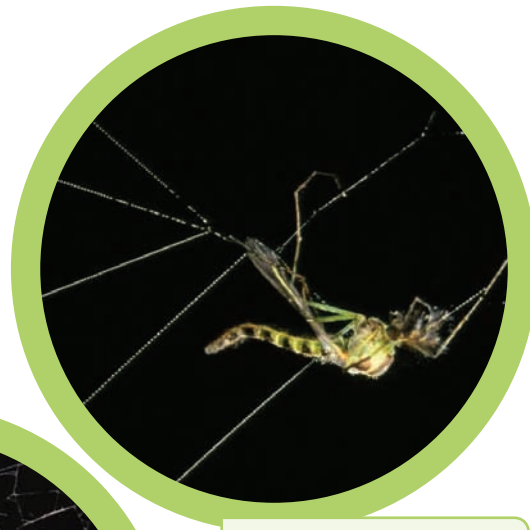
To make a web, a spider spins silk out of its spinnerets.

The orb web spider builds a web that looks like the spokes of a bicycle wheel. At night, the spider sits in the middle of its web, but during the day, it hides so that birds and wasps can't see it (and eat it).

The spider keeps a line of silk from the web attached to its body. When an insect flies or walks into the web, it gets trapped in the sticky silk. As the insect moves, it shakes the web. This shaking tells the spider that dinner has arrived!



Orb web spider



An insect caught in a web

Imagine what would happen if you tied a long piece of string to your finger and attached the other end to a trampoline. When somebody bounced on the trampoline, the string would pull your finger. The silk line works the same way. When an insect gets trapped in the web and makes the web bounce, the line tugs on the spider.

Some spiders grab their prey

Not all spiders make webs. The crab spider uses camouflage to make itself hard to see. It is the same colour as the green leaves it sits on. It has two long pairs of front legs, and it stays very still with these front legs stretched out, looking as if it's ready for a big hug. When an insect lands nearby, the crab spider does give the insect a "hug" – but it doesn't let go again until it has finished eating the insect!



Crab spider

The king of the jungle

The lion is known as “the king of the jungle”. There are no lions in my jungle garden, so what creature is the “king”? Like the crab spider, this creature uses camouflage by matching the colour of the leaves it sits on. It also stays very still and waits for dinner to arrive. It has long front legs that it uses to grab anything that comes too close. But this insect is a lot bigger than a crab spider ... it's the praying mantis. It eats spiders, aphids, ladybirds, and many other insects – even bees and wasps.



Praying mantis

Next time you are in a garden, look carefully and you will see tiny creatures all around you. Many only come out when it's dark. You could use a torch and look for them in your garden at night. Have a close look and see what you can find.

Can you name the creatures in these photos? Go to the inside back cover to check your answers.

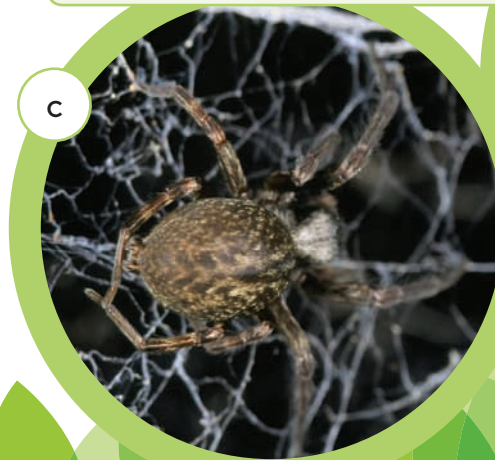
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Look, but don't touch!

If you find any spiders or insects, don't touch them. They are very small, so you could hurt them or even kill them if you do. Also, some insects or spiders might bite you or sting you. So look, but don't touch!

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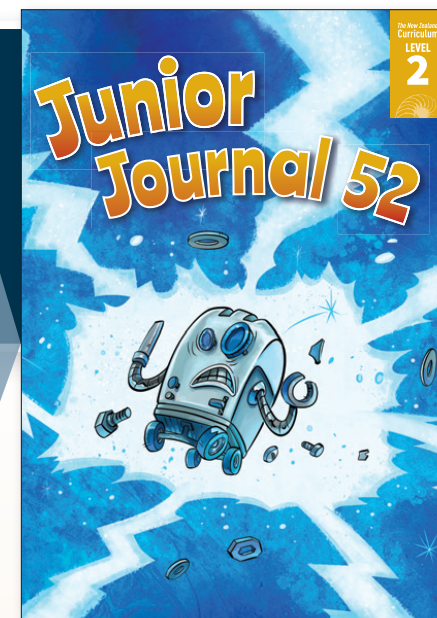
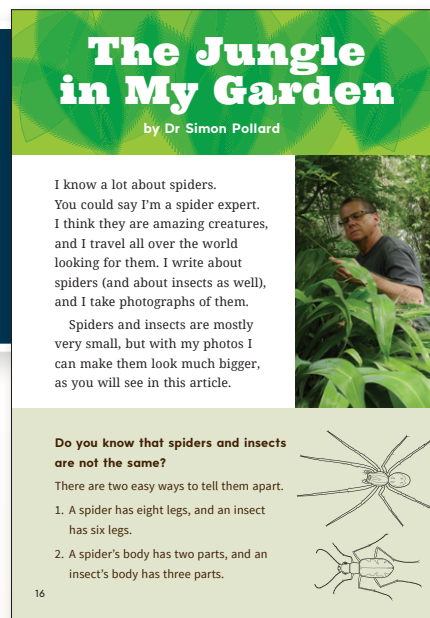
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