



Brunswick Wildlife Golden Silk Spider

The Golden Silk Spider is a resident of the southeastern United States, with the Lower Cape Fear region being the northern extent of its range. That is for now. These guys are relatively new to our area and they are still expanding northward, with higher concentrations generally found near the coast.

“Golden Silk Orbweaver” is the official common name given this spider by the American Arachnological Society. An “orb” is a spiral spider web and the “golden silk” comes from the color of their web silk.

The larger of the two spiders in the photograph is the female and the smaller is the male. Seems like lunchtime at the arachnid food court. The dragonfly looks tasty today. The male’s fondest wish, however, is that he doesn’t end up on the menu. Trust me on that!

The golden silk shines like gold in sunlight. Scientists think the color serves two purposes. in sun to capture insects that are attracted to the bright color and in shade to blend into the background foliage, acting as camouflage. I can attest that in shade the webs, generally spread across open spaces like trails, are difficult to see.

During late summer and fall the large golden webs form an obstacle course for hunters and hikers...and birders. Fortunately, the Golden Silk Spider poses little danger to humans. If you try to catch or handle one of these spiders, you are asking to be bitten and are likely to get it. The bite will cause a little redness around the wound which usually goes away in the next day or so. Their venom is a potent neurotoxin but generally not potent enough to be dangerous to humans.

The spider’s “buffet” line also includes flies, bees, wasps, small moths, butterflies, beetles, and dragonflies. One photo originally showed a dehydrated shell of a caterpillar; however, I had to crop it out to better highlight the spider and its current entrée.

The colorful female's body length may be up to one and a half inches. The duller, dark brown male is approximately one fifth the size of the female. The male is generally located above and perpendicular to the female as shown in the photo.

Golden Silk Spiders have only one generation per year. In fall, the female deposits two or more large egg sacs, each containing of several hundred eggs.

Females weave flat, spiral-shaped webs with sticky capture silk laced between non-sticky support strands. The final result is a huge three to eight foot span of spoke strands and framing to support an orb of up to three feet across, perfect for snagging flying insects.

Web construction is no less than an engineering marvel! The spider floats a strand in space and the wind then carries it until the strand attaches to another location. A new line, representing the third radii or spoke, is then dropped from the center forming a "Y". The remainder of the radii and frame are added followed by a spiral of sticky capture silk.

Webs are durable structures. They are not periodically destroyed and recreated, as in the case of some species of spiders. If salvageable, large portions of the web may be repaired without rebuilding what remains. The orb is reworked regularly since it loses stickiness over time and due to weather.

Why is this repair capability notable? If you cannot go around a web on your path, use a hand to break several support strands on one side of the frame. The spider should be pulled to the other side while you duck under the remaining structure. By the next day, the web will be repaired or rebuilt...leaving you free of guilt of interfering with nature.

John Ennis

The "Featured Creatures" website, maintained by the University of Florida Institute of Food and Agricultural Sciences and Florida Department of Agriculture and Consumer Services, was the source of background material for this article. For a severe case of arachnophobia, go to: <http://creatures.ifas.ufl.edu>.

