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NOTES ON THE NATURAL HABITAT OF THE BROWN RECLUSE SPIDER¹

Loxosceles reclusa Gertsch and Mulaik
Maxine Hite

University of Arkansas

Throughout history spiders have been regarded generally as creatures to fear and avoid. Folklore credits all spiders as being quite poisonous. While almost all spiders do have poison glands, only a few are known to be poisonous to man or other mammals. One which is poisonous is the brown recluse (Fig. 1).

During recent years this spider has attracted much attention in this part of the United States because it has been found that its bite is poisonous to man, causing a sloughing of the affected area (Atkins, et al., 1958; Wingo, 1960).

Several proved cases of necrosis resulting from the bite were reported in northwest Arkansas in 1961.

In 1962, a study of its habits, habitat, and life history was initiated.

According to Gertsch (1958), the genus *Loxosceles* is widely distributed in the temperate and tropical zones of the world. He reports that *Loxosceles reclusa* is found in the south-eastern and central United States from Tennessee and Alabama westward to Kansas, Oklahoma, and Texas.

Wingo (1960) obtained records to show that it was common in Missouri, south of the Missouri River. In 1959, Baerg stated (p. 33) that "a reasonable conclusion is that the species occurs more or less frequently throughout Arkansas."

I first collected the brown recluse in northwest Arkansas during 1956 and 1957 when collecting spiders for Dr. H. W. Levi. Later when Dr. Gertsch was making his study of *Loxosceles*, he obtained this material, and, in his paper on this genus (1958, p. 10), noted that I had taken "many mature males and females during most of the months of the year."

Speaking of the genus in general, Gertsch states, "They are quite active nocturnal types that live under cover, beneath stones, boards, or other ground objects, in holes in the ground, under the bark of trees, or in crevices in the walls of buildings" (p. 1).

Both Baerg (1959) and Wingo (1960) reported that the brown recluse was most often found about the house and as-

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sociated buildings. Because it has been so frequently found in such places, it is commonly regarded as a "house" spider.

For the first five months after we began collecting these spiders in 1962, all were taken in and about houses: in attics, closets, sinks, bathtubs, boxes of papers, dresser drawers, boxes of toys, front porches, schoolrooms, garages, utility rooms, clothing that had been hanging for some time undisturbed, and in bedrooms beneath beds. However, we believe that their natural habitat is out-of-doors. The specimens collected in 1956 and 1957 for Dr. Levi were found in oak-hickory woods beneath rocks, logs, and loose bark of dead trees. This past winter and early spring, we have found them in large numbers in what we consider could be their primary habitat. This is under dry sandstone bluffs, beneath the flat rocks that have fallen from above.

SUMMARY

The brown recluse spider, poisonous to man, is usually encountered in houses and associated buildings. However, its natural habitat appears to be under dry bluffs, beneath the flat rocks that have fallen from above.

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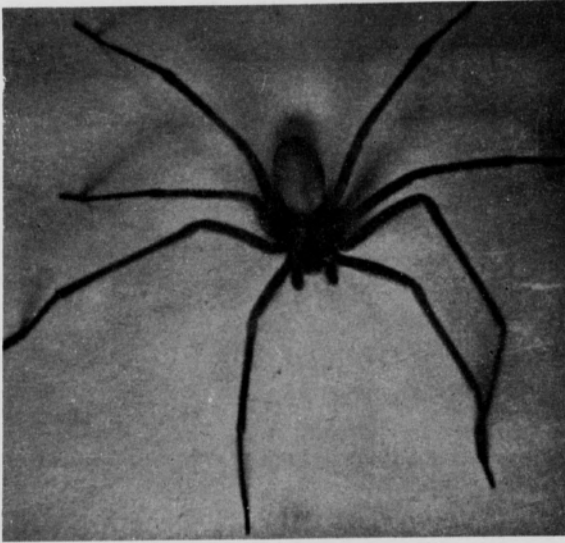


Figure 1. Mature female of the brown recluse spider,
Loxosceles reclusa.