

Notable Natives

Banana Spider

I was a little girl during World War II. The back side of our block was largely undeveloped, and we called it “the prairie.” Besides being the location of victory gardens and ceremonial funerals for pets and small wildlife, it was the place for discovering nature. The kids on the block were always excited to find a “banana spider,” our popular name for *Argiope aurantia*. Also called a garden spider, it is relatively large (the female), fairly stationary, and very colorful; therefore, it was easy to find and watch in its web.

This yellow and black spider spins a web that has spokes and circles – an orb web. The female usually re-constructs the center of her web every day, having eaten a good portion of the previous day’s web. The spider captures grasshoppers, cicadas, moths, wasps, bees, and other insects, some of them a good deal larger than she is.

I spent most of my adult life in an urban environment, and my sightings of this wonderful garden spider didn’t resume until we moved to this semi-rural Barrington setting. I’m always tickled to see it.

The female of the species may get to be 1½ inches while males are quite a bit smaller, perhaps ¼" to ¾". The webs of the female can be quite large, perhaps two feet across, and will often have a dense area called a “stabilimentum” in the center. Although there is some disagreement about its purpose, it alerts birds to the presence of the web so that they don’t fly through and destroy it. It is a feature only used by spiders active during the day.

Spiders mature in the summer. Spiderlings winter over in egg sacs, dispersing in the spring. Many of these baby spiders don’t survive since they are a major food source for birds. Spiders serve the ecosystem by being both insect predators and a source of food for birds.



Banana spider. Photo by Diana Maduzia.

Whenever I see publicity for “No Child Left Inside,” I am reminded of the wonderful discoveries nature has in store for children and how fortunate I was to have ready access in my own childhood. I hope there are banana spiders patiently waiting in their webs to be discovered by today’s curious children. These spiders are not harmful to people and provide a great introduction to the world of spiders.

— Carol Rice