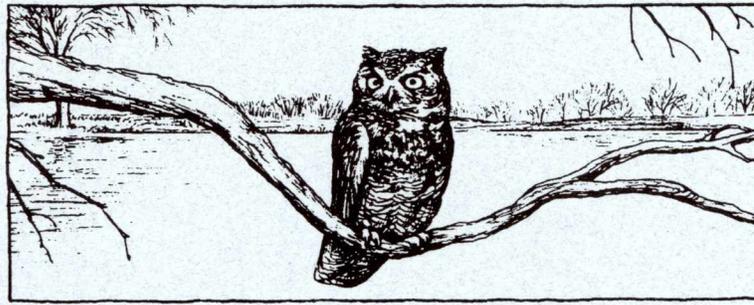


STILLMAN NEWSLETTER



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SPIDER GARDENS

--Mark Spreyer

This past Halloween, I couldn't help but recall a fellow graduate student who I came to know while doing owl research in Minnesota. On occasion, I would drop by her office which she shared with her husband, a Professor, and a jar of live black widows. Keep in mind that neither her nor her husband's research was concerned with spiders. I guess she just liked their company. To be honest, I was glad my office was one floor up. It's not that I'm phobic or anything. I've held all of the "big three" of creepy-crawlies: bats, snakes and spiders. The biggest spider I've held was a tarantula which, with all of its fur, felt like a long-legged hamster.

Be that as it may, if you are concerned about poisonous spiders, the "look but don't touch" policy is the safest. If you follow this practice, the odds of being bit by one of Illinois' few poisonous spiders, the brown recluse or black widow, are virtually nil. They are both shy and timid spiders that only bite if squeezed or held against the body in some way. With that poisonous spider disclaimer out of the way... back to the column.

Late last summer, based on the calls received here at Stillman, people were discovering spider gardens, if you will, in their yards and near their places of business. The dramatic size and colors of these spiders identified them as garden spiders. Of course, a variety of spiders are loosely referred to as "garden spiders." These garden spiders, and the subject of this article, are members of the genus *Argiope*.

There are two *Argiopes* commonly found in Illinois, the black-and-yellow and the banded garden spider. Each has an inch-long body. Add on their long legs, and the spiders are approximately three inches in

length. Besides being big on their own, they weave a large, halloween-classic, orb web. The web, which hangs vertically, is usually placed in open areas between tall grasses or weeds. The black-and-yellow argiope tends to build its web higher above the ground than the banded garden spider. If the spider is disturbed, it often drops to the ground.

So, as you approach a web, you may miss the spider. However, a close look at the web can reveal the telltale signature of its occupant; a white zig-zag band runs a short distance, up and down, from the center of the orb.

If the spider remains on the web, it typically positions itself upside down with its eight legs paired up. If you imagine the face of a clock at the center of the web, the two back pairs of legs are pointing at 1 and 11 while the front pairs point at 5 and 7. The adult *Argiopes* are generally not visible until August or September which explains the timing of the calls to the nature center. As the females are larger and more colorful than the males, they are the ones you are likely to see.

Now, if you're looking at the top side of the spider, the head (technically speaking, it's the cephalothorax) of the black-and-yellow garden spider is gray and yellow with a fine coating of silvery hairs. The same area on a banded argiope is yellow with grayish white scales. The most obvious difference between the two is the pattern on the top of their abdomens.

These abdomen patterns have earned the *Argiopes* their names. The banded garden spider dis-



STILLMAN NATURE CENTER

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plays a series of alternating silver-and-yellow and black bands. The black-and-yellow garden spider has a wide black area running down the center of the abdomen. The sides are marked with large yellow bands, appearing like irregular blotches, separated by narrow black stripes that connect back to the dark median area. In overall shape, the banded argiope's abdomen comes to more of a point than does the black and-yellow's abdomen.

These spiders' long legs are also brightly colored. The banded garden spider's legs can range in color from orange-yellow to brown with dark spots and rings. The black-and-yellow's legs are, well, black and yellow, although segments of the legs can also be orange or reddish.

A spider's markings aside, it is the symmetrical beauty of a spider's web that often catches the eye. Late last summer, I saw such a creation, dripping with beads of morning dew. It glistened in the sun like a web of jewels. As I enjoyed this scene, which was destined to quickly change as the heat of the day evaporated the dew, I thought of the following passage by Elwyn White.

*When I get sick of what men do,
I have only to walk a few steps in
another direction to see what spiders do.
Or what the weather does. This sustains
me very well indeed.*

When the warm weather returns, I encourage you to walk a few steps in another direction and see what Argiope does.

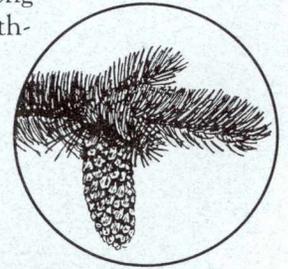
PROGRAMS

Program Basics: PLEASE CALL OR FAX US AT 428-OWLS(6957), OR EMAIL STILLMAN AT: stillnc@flash.net TO MAKE RESERVATIONS for programs. Remember to include your name, phone number, and the number of people that will be attending. *Please, no scout groups.*

If less than 5 - 10 people (varying with the program) have called two days prior to a program, the program could well be cancelled. So, don't forget to call the nature center in advance. If you discover that you are unable to attend, please call to cancel your reservations. This courtesy will be greatly appreciated.

NAME THAT TREE or THIS BUD'S FOR YOU!

With the help of Stillman's naturalist, you'll learn how to identify cherry, maple, ash and other midwestern trees. Easy to remember tips and simple hand-outs will keep you from barking up the wrong tree! Come prepared for the weather and bring your questions. Teachers and garden club members are especially welcome.



Date: Sunday, Jan. 24
Time: 2:00PM
Age: 10 years and up
Fee: None

OWL MOON WALK

Native Americans called January's full moon the "owl moon." This January, there will be two full moons, the second being the "blue moon." In honor of this second owl moon, Mark Spreyer will present an indoor presentation on owls. Afterwards, with the help of the almost full moon, we will walk the trails in search of Stillman's Great Horned Owls. Space is limited so call 428-OWLS to make reservations.



Date: Saturday, Jan. 30
Time: 6:00PM
Age: 10 years and up
Fee: None

MAKING TRACKS

Join Susan Allman as she shows you how to recognize the different types of tracks made by winter's active animals. After an indoor introduction, explore Stillman's trails for signs of rabbit, squirrel, deer and fox. If there is no snow on the ground, the program will be cancelled.

Date: Sunday, Feb. 7
Time: 2:00PM
Fee: None

COMPASS USE

Learning to use a compass is a practical and fun outdoor skill. Unlike competitive orienteering courses, ours is a compass-guided nature exploration. Remember to dress appropriately as you are likely to encounter thorny shrubs. We'll provide instruction and compasses.

Date: Sunday, Feb. 14
Time: 2:00PM
Age: 10 years and up
Fee: None

For reservations, please call 428-OWLS.

ENDANGERED SPECIES EDUCATORS' WORKSHOP

Twenty-five years ago, the Endangered Species Act, one of the most impressive pieces of environmental legislation ever passed, became law. This workshop, hosted by the Stillman Nature Center, is aimed at educators who want to learn what an endangered species is, why they are valuable, and what is being done to conserve Chicagoland's endangered species.

The instructors will be Cyndi Duda, Environmental Education Specialist with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, and Stillman's own Mark Spreyer. The Fish and Wildlife Service is the agency responsible for determining which plants and animals appear on the endangered species list. Mark Spreyer organized and directed Chicago's Peregrine Falcon release program. During his tenure, endangered Peregrine Falcons, that had not nested in Illinois since 1951, returned to successfully nest in Chicago.

Workshop participants will receive a variety of endangered species materials and publications. The information presented will be appropriate for K-12 grade students as well as adult audiences. Participants will also learn where to get other endangered species educational resources at little or no cost.

Reservations are a must. To sign up, call Mark at (847) 428-OWLS.

Date: Saturday, Feb. 20
Time: 9:00AM to 12:00PM
Stillman Member's Fee: \$10.00
Non-member's Fee: \$12.00, payable to
Stillman Nature Center.

OUR BIG BROWN BAT HOUSE

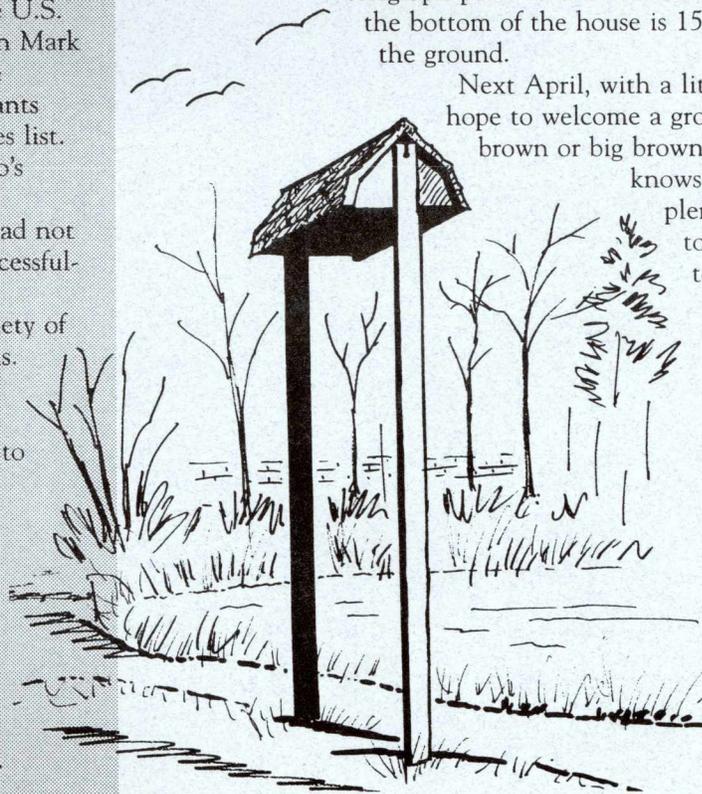
Over a decade ago, the Illinois Dept. of Natural Resources gave Stillman a BIG bat house. How big? It measures, roughly, 4.5 feet by 7 feet and, since it was made out of oak, can't weigh less than 400 pounds.

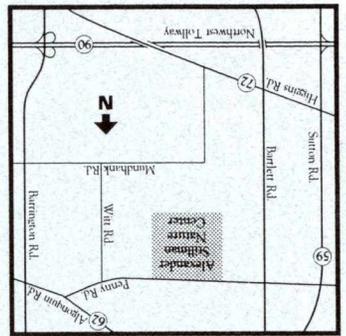
With the help of volunteers, it was cleverly mounted on some large poles near the pond's edge by the service drive. Years went by and even though bats are in the area, none used our structure. Although there are no guarantees that bats will use a house, there was one likely reason why ours was being ignored. The bottom of this massive house was only about 7 feet above the ground. Ideally, a bat house should be from 12 - 20 feet above the ground.

I don't mean to sound critical of those who originally mounted the bat house. According to the DNR's own publication, *Wood Projects for Illinois Wildlife*, such large bat structures "are expensive to build and difficult to erect." Perhaps, that's why this bat house ended up here.

In any event, we turned the project of elevating the bat house over to the folks at Wirkus Nurseries. They used heavy equipment and old telegraph poles to raise our bat house. Now, the bottom of the house is 15 feet above the ground.

Next April, with a little luck, we hope to welcome a group of little brown or big brown bats. Heaven knows, we have plenty of mosquitoes for them to feed on.





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 33 West Penny Road

STILLMAN
 nature center



Open Sundays 1-4

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If you aren't already a member, please consider joining us.

Yes, I'd like to become a member of the Stillman Nature Center. I enclose my tax deductible contribution of \$_____.

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