



SCOUTING the Northwest

By Scout Arnone

Fear not the false black widow

“Teacher Scout! Come look! I found something!” a 5-year-old student called out to me.

I put aside my lesson plans and went to see what had captured him so completely.

“It’s a spider!”

Sure enough, the young naturalist was placing his hands gently on the ground so the spider could crawl onboard. For some reason, this particular student never demonstrated the patience and fortitude to listen to anything I had to say about leaf shapes, ungulate tracks, or which berries were inedible,

but he was still and patient as the spider slowly moved one leg at a time until it was completely on his hand.

He smiled brightly, “I think it’s a black widow!”

It crawled all over his arms, but I felt it crawl all over me. He beamed from ear to ear.

This moment was crucial. All deep-rooted feelings I had fostered against spiders: the trauma of finding a widow in my hair, and the years of throwing shoes at a wall in a fearful squashing attempt were starting to creep to the surface.

I took a deep breath and tried to don an expression that displayed a general love and acceptance of all creatures.

“Cool!” I said, “You made a friend!”

“Yeah, and I think she is a black widow.”

“Oh, boy. Let’s see here. Make sure you’re being gentle.” I said maneuvering around him. I came down to his level.

“What do you know about black widows?” I asked.

“They are mean and poisonous so much they can make you die!” He said. I wasn’t quite sure how he had managed to disconnect the dangerous creature he was describing from the peril

he suggested he might be in, but he just kept smiling and rotating his arm different angles to stop her from running up his sleeve.

The western black widow (*Lactrodectus hesperus*) is likely the most dangerous spider in Oregon. A single bite from a black widow damages the nervous system and manifests as abdominal muscle cramps, nausea, profuse perspiration, tremors, fever, and labored breathing. Symptoms can carry on for many days.

“That’s true, but she’s also a really good helper.”

The black widow’s messy web wedged in the darkest corner of your garage is made of some of the strongest arachnid silk around and is hyper-reactive to any movements. This is essential as the rest of her hunting senses are quite dull. She hangs upside-down, thanklessly reducing your mosquito population, your boxelder intruders, and your bothersome flies. She interrupts the line of ants marching to your kitchen, the cockroaches scuttling toward your baseboards, and scorpions the cat thoughtfully left on the doorstep.

Now, the spider he was holding was *not* a black widow, it was a false black widow, identified easily by



PHOTO BY SCOUT ARNONE

Black widows are not villains of the natural world.

the glaring lack of red hourglass on its underside. But I decided that a spider ID session was best suited for another day, as a much more precious lesson was transpiring. A kid’s world is very black and white; the villains in their cartoons operate simply for evil’s sake. But the “villains” of the natural world (rattlesnakes, scorpions, and spiders) operate without cruelty or intent to harm — only evolutionary integrity. And the sooner we can teach children about the value of our most-feared creatures, the sooner they can develop a respect for all life, protect that life, and save our planet.

“Let’s make sure we find

her a good place to sit and catch bugs!” I told him.

We took the spider outside and walked around the building until we found a forgotten corner.

“Here, you put her up there!” he said, extending the spider to me.

Every muscle tensed and the spider continued crawling around and around his outstretched hand.

“Aww! I’d love to, but it’s important for you to learn how to take care of our animal friends, too! That’s it. Place her gently. Yep. Gently brush her off.”

A very grateful spider scurried away, and a very grateful teacher did not stop her.

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