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## Serendipity: Brake for Tarantulas

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By Karen Telleen-Lawton, Noozhawk Columnist

One theory holds that the spiders time their migration with meteor showers in late October; if so, this year's migration will peak Tuesday.

"Dude, I almost ran over the biggest spider I've ever seen!"



Karen Telleen-Lawton

Paul Rogers, a young friend of mine and recent transplant from Kansas, was removing his motorcycle helmet and gesturing wildly. There wasn't anybody else around, so I surmised I was the dude. He went on to describe a thick, chocolate-brown body and hairy legs spreading to at least 6 inches.

"Oh, that's a [tarantula](#)," I told him. "They're not poisonous, and they migrate this time of year. I'm glad you didn't run him over."

"It was hard not to," he laughed nervously. "I had to swerve to avoid him."

The encounter reminded me of my old neighbor, Frank Van Schaick, a Santa Barbara educator and naturalist who died in 2006 at age 95. Van always encouraged his students at Wilson School (razed in 1946) to bring tarantulas for their live classroom menagerie.

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“The soft dignity with which these huge spiders stalk along on their hairy legs have gained them a measure of interested tolerance, if not outright popularity,” he once wrote.

I depended on those gentle words a few days later, while weeding in my blue grama meadow. Hunched over the grass, I glanced up to meet a tarantula about 30 inches from my face. My first reaction was horror, but I forced myself to calm down. I stared at him, trying to decipher his grotesque features. After awhile, I decided I was finished weeding for the day.

[KCOY TV's Web site](#) touts tarantulas as good pets, having furriness in common with dogs and cats. They suggest letting your tarantula get to know you gradually.

“Stroke it gently and pick it up with a gradual scooping motion,” it says. “If you frighten it, it may bite. Tarantulas may look scary, but their bite isn’t dangerous. Finally, if you don’t mind if your pet crawls on you, you probably won’t mind feeding it. Just find a good source of live crickets.”

My friend Paul was fascinated by this new aspect of the Wild West, roaming the Internet for information. He found a site called [The Nojoqui Tarantula Migration DxPeditions](#), where a group of arachnid aficionados have been tracking the annual migration for years, trying to confirm or debunk various stories and theories.



A tarantula, about the size of a camera case, crosses Las Canoas Road. (Karen Telleen-Lawton photo)

One theory holds that tarantulas time their migration with meteor showers in late October. If this holds, this year's migration will peak Tuesday with the Orionid meteor shower.

Some stories tell of death and destruction, such as cows being devoured on the path of the migration. A 1912 report claims that thousands of tarantulas were buried alive when a heavy rainstorm caused a landslide on the night of the migration, and a 1946 story says tarantulas bridging over an electric fence ignited one of the largest wildfires in Santa Barbara history.

Steven Hammer, who manages the Nojoqui tarantula Web site, says males migrate about 50 miles to their ancestral breeding grounds in northern Santa Barbara County. For a while, some scientists speculated that the Nojoqui tarantulas were close to extinction.

"No one believes anymore that extinction is a possibility," Hammer says, "just that development and human encroachment into the urban/wildland interface areas hampers the tarantula's migratory practices. Thankfully, the county has placed signs and has closed roads" when their numbers are large.

Since it's impossible to travel 50 miles without crossing roads, here's one more thing we need to do for a sustainable environment: Brake for tarantulas!

*Karen Telleen-Lawton's column is a mélange of observations supporting sustainability. Graze her writing and excerpts from Canyon Voices: the Nature of Rattlesnake Canyon at [www.canyonvoices.com](http://www.canyonvoices.com).*

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