



**P & K Pets
Info Sheet #22**

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BIRD EATING SPIDERS CARE



INFORMATION



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INTRODUCTION

Bird eating spiders (*Selenocosmia crassipes*) are also known as barking spiders or whistling spiders. This is due to the noise they make, which can be compared to the noise of running your fingernail down a comb. They generate the noise by rubbing their palps with their fangs. This is the largest species of spider in Australia, and is part of the tarantula family, which comprises of the largest spiders in the world. The largest tarantula can measure up to 33cm (13”), while the Australian bird eating spider can reach sizes up to 6.5cm (2.6”) for the female and 5cm (2”) for the male.



The spiders are common to upper Queensland and the Northern Territory. There are at least 4 kinds of the species found here. These spiders live under logs or in burrows which are 3cm wide and 60cm deep, which they line with silk. Sometimes a loose web is made around the entrance and they have also been compared to trap door spiders, as they will jump out to grab prey. The spiders are nocturnal and mainly come out at night.

These spiders are venomous, the bite is potentially dangerous for they have fangs that grow up to 10mm in length with a diameter of 2.5mm at the base. There are however no human fatalities, but a bite to a human will cause severe pain and swelling. These fangs are great weapons. When provoked, they rear up and strike downwards. The penetration of such large fangs without venom is dangerous in itself for most prey. They have been known to crush a victim with their fangs before the venom has been injected or had time to work.

HOUSING

The home for your bird eating spider should be a large vivarium (2 foot or better) with a very deep substrate. This will allow them to burrow for their den. It a great idea to actually make their den (or at least start it) for them on the side of the glass so you can see them when they are inside (hiding). You will need to cover the side of the glass with a flap (cardboard or better) so that no light gets in.



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While they are hiding in the day you can occasionally lift the flap and take a peek. Keep in mind that if any light can get in, or you peek too often, they will not use it as their burrow.



A combination of soil, potting mix and some peat moss will make an excellent substrate. The peat moss (left in one corner) can be kept damp, which will help maintain humidity. Bark, leaves, logs and other items may be used to simulate a natural bush setting. Water should be made available, but it will not be used by the spider for drinking as they get all the moisture they need from their prey. It may however be helpful when moulting, but will mainly only help to maintain humidity. They are hardy in regards to temperature, but if your vivarium is regularly below 22°C you should consider a heater or heat lamp.

FEEDING

Bird Eating Spiders kill their prey by pouncing on it and injecting venom. They eat insects, lizards, frogs occasionally, small birds and other spiders (particularly the Lycosa species). All food is captured in the area near their burrows. Having no teeth, they rely on digestive juices to dissolve their food. The amazing thing about these spiders is that their digestive juices dissolve scales and bone, there is little left of their prey once they have finished eating. When the spider has finished eating, the spider normally covers the entrance to their tunnel with web, sealing it. The web door remains until the spider is ready to eat again.

In captivity your spider will mainly eat crickets and pinkies or fuzzies (baby mice) which are all available from your pet store. When growing, bird eating spider will eat a few times a week, but when adult they can go for months without feeding, so don't panic if they aren't. Their abdomen is a good indication of their health and food requirements. You should always keep an eye on their abdomen and know when they are healthy. After a long period without food their abdomen will shrink slightly, when fed it will fill up again. By careful observation you should be able to accurately determine your spiders requirements.



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BREEDING

The female bird eating spider lives up to 10 years, while the male only lives for two or three. She spends most of her life in or close to the silk lined burrow. The male lives in a burrow too but leaves it when an adult for mating. Soon after mating the male usually dies, or more commonly is eaten by the female. The female lays her eggs and sticks the egg sac in a special part of the burrow. The egg sac is 35mm by 30mm and oval in shape. It is thicker at the centre, is very white and made of tough silk. It is very difficult to get the spiders to breed in captivity.



The eggs are 2mm in diameter and are translucent, with a rich yellow colour. The female lays around 48 eggs. The young stay with their mother before wandering away. They are about 10mm long in the body when they leave the burrow. In late September to the end of October mating takes place and females are usually found with egg sacs in November to December.

GENERAL

One female tarantula specimen lived in the British Natural History Museum for thirteen years, and they estimated it was already 7 years old when they got it. There was also a report in Australia of a bird eating spider dragging a fish carcass from the water, through the bush and to its burrow. Bird eating spiders sometimes prey on young birds and chicks while still in their nest, which is where they get their common name. These spiders are very interesting to watch, but they need to be observed at dusk or night time.