

# WALK ON THE WILDSIDE

The Minnesota Conservation Federation

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## Spiders are beneficial to state's ecosystem

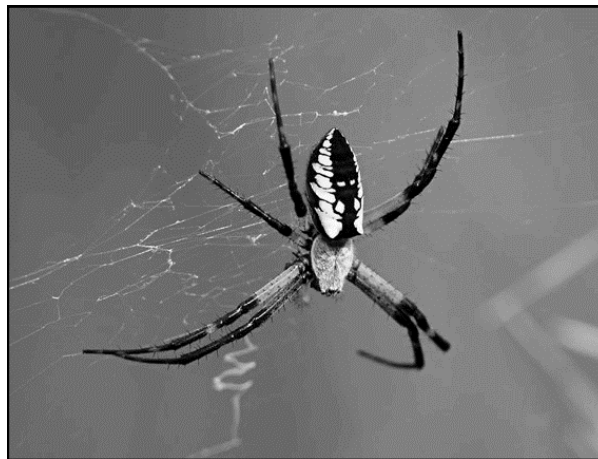
When many people think of spiders they may become fearful, because they imagine creepy, crawly creatures that live in dark places.

Spiders may seem creepy, but they are important members of Minnesota's natural world and they are around throughout much of the year, just about any place you look, including your backyard, garage and basement.

Many people confuse spiders with insects, but spiders are not insects, they belong to a family of creatures called arachnids, which also includes ticks and mites.

Although they may look similar, arachnids differ from insects in a number of ways, the most noticeable are their legs and bodies. Arachnids have eight legs, while insects have six legs. Arachnids have two sections to their body, while insects have three.

Another difference is silk. Arachnids can create silk throughout their lifetime, while only a few insects can create silk and they



can only do it during short periods during their lifetimes.

About 500 spider species have been identified in Minnesota, but there are probably more waiting to be discovered.

Minnesota's spider species can be divided into two different categories: hunters and web-builders. As you can probably guess, web-building spiders build webs and wait for food to come to them. Hunting spiders do not build webs, but instead go out looking for food.

The hunting varieties of spiders have good eyesight and rely on their speed to pounce on unsuspecting prey. Web-building spiders typically have poor eyesight and depend on vibrations in the

web to locate prey.

### Hunters

The hunting variety of spiders can be divided into six main kinds of spiders: jumping spiders, fishing spiders, wolf spiders, sac spiders, crab spiders and gnaphosid spiders.

**Gnaphosid spiders:** Are usually found outside. They are not easy to spot, because most are only active at night. They usually hide in cracks or under rocks.

**Jumping spiders:** Are among the more commonly seen spiders in Minnesota. They are often found indoors and outdoors. They are active during the day and like well-lighted areas. They are usually dark in color with light or white markings.

**Wolf spiders:** Are usually dark colored throughout their body. They hunt in daylight or at night, and are more commonly seen outdoors. They like woods, leaves, grass and swamps, and some varieties live underground.

**Fishing spiders:** As their name suggests, fishing spiders are typically found near water, especially near lakes, ponds or streams. They

# Animals undergo a change for the winter

The temperature keeps dropping and by January Minnesota is usually colder than a freezer and whiter than the vanilla ice cream kept there. This is the time of year when a coat is necessary!

So it is with animals. Most, who are active in the winter have winter coats. But, there is more to a coat than just its warmth. For some, the color is just as important as how warm their fur keeps them in the winter.

Camouflage (the ability to blend into surroundings) is necessary to survival for most animal species.

Some mammals, like Minnesota's ermine, weasels, and snowshoe hares molt in a manner known as a *photoperiodic phenomenon*.

The snowshoe hare is a good example. When autumn days get shorter, the hare, usually dark brown in summer, begins to grow a coat of white tipped hair. By the time the ground is white, so is the hare. When spring arrives, the hare sheds its winter coat. If all goes well, the hare is warmer and



**The jackrabbit changes color for the winter to blend in to its surroundings.**

little safer. However, a winter with little snow cover or an early spring thaw does blow the hare's cover.

While the snowshoe hare inhabits mainly northern portions of Minnesota, its close cousin, the white-tailed jackrabbit lives in southern and western portions of the state, and also changes color for winter.

During the summer, the jackrabbit has brown-gray fur with a white belly, white feet and a whitetail. But as winter approaches, the jackrabbit's fur begins to change to all white.

Weasels are a little different. When northern weasels molt, they become *piebald*. This means their

color is spotted dark and white. During this time, they make easy prey for owls, hawks, snakes and foxes. Many weasels live in areas to the south where there is little snow cover--ever. Weasels living in the south molt, but remain brown. Take this weasel north and it remains brown. Take a northern weasel south, and it will still turn white.

For these Minnesota mammals, white remains the color of choice for a winter coat.

## Not camo

You may occasionally spot a white squirrel, cottontail rabbit, or deer, but their coloring has nothing to do with camouflage.

These animals are albinos, a genetic trait that causes a lack of pigmentation or coloring. Albinos are especially vulnerable to predators, because they lack camouflage.

## Bird changes

Although none of Minnesota's bird species turn white for the winter, some of the bird species that remain in Minnesota all winter, do change color for the winter.

# St. Louis River takes long journey to Superior

**O**f the great rivers of Northeastern Minnesota flows through rugged ancient rock and thick northern woodlands as it makes its way toward the world's largest lake.

The St. Louis River begins its journey in Hoyt Lakes and works its way to the southwest before curving to the southeast and reaching Lake Superior at Duluth and Superior, Wisconsin.

Along its course, the St. Louis River flows through quiet woodlands; then tumbles violently through rugged, ancient rock, before flowing through reddish clay bottoms and reaching Lake Superior.

The St. Louis River journeys 179 miles along its course and drains a watershed of 3,634 square miles, making it the largest U.S. tributary of Lake Superior.

One of the notable and prominent features of the St. Louis River is its 12,000-acre estuary, which is formed near Duluth, where the river intersects with the lake. This



**The St. Louis River is the largest U.S. tributary of Lake Superior.**

large lake-like area, which is home to both wildlife and shipping ports.

## Pollution

It was not long ago that the St. Louis River was one of the most polluted rivers in Minnesota. Decades of pollution from industrial sources flowed into the river, leaving an unhealthy mix of toxic chemicals in the river. The most polluted area of the river was the lower estuary, where shipping and industry severely affected the river.

Gradually, efforts were made to clean up the St. Louis River and today it is a much healthier body

of water. However, much work is left to be done. The river is still threatened by pollution and watched closely. Work is still in progress to reduce these threats to the St. Louis.

## Wildlife

The clean-up of the St. Louis River has resulted in a dramatic return of wildlife, especially at the upper estuary.

Today, visitors may spot numerous waterfowl, shorebirds and raptors, as well as mammals such as beavers and muskrats.

Fishing has also improved dramatically along the St. Louis River. The river is now a major destination for anglers who can catch a wide variety of game fish in its waters.

## Whitewater

The turbid whitewater sections of the St. Louis River have become a popular destination for whitewater rafters, who come to try their luck at paddling through the most violent sections of the river.

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## Learn about lake ice safety through Minnesota DNR

Minnesota residents participate in many outdoor activities during the winter, many take place on frozen lakes. During most winters, much of the lake ice in the state is

pretty safe, but how do we know what is safe?

The Minnesota Department of Natural Resources offers guidelines on ice thickness to help us

determine what is safe. To learn more, visit the DNR website at <http://www.dnr.state.mn.us/safety/ice/thickness.html>

# Birds love highbush cranberries in the winter

**H**ighbush Cranberries grow on bushes in the northern parts of Minnesota, but do not confuse these berries with the cranberries we eat at Thanksgiving.

The “domesticated” cranberries are grown commercially and sweetened to adapt to our taste.

The highbush cranberry makes no such adaptations. The bushes are still laden with berries in late December. Birds and other wildlife have stripped other fruit bear-



ing bushes long before winter. This beautiful, scarlet fruit simply does not compete.

Birds are looking for fruit that is high in fat content. For a bird, it

is like high-octane fuel.

When other fruits are available, birds will make the obvious choice. However, as it gets later into winter, those high-fat content berries have all been eaten or rotted away. The highbush cranberry, as well as berries of the mountain ash and winterberry, begin to have some appeal.

If it weren't for the different maturing stages of berry-bearing bushes, birds and other wildlife wouldn't have anything to eat.

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to capture their food.

**Sac spiders:** Are among the most commonly found spiders indoors. They are light colored and of medium size. They do not build webs, but do build homes of silk on leaves, rocks, walls or ceilings.

**Crab spiders:** A variety of spiders typically seen outdoors. They are small spiders that can range in color from red to yellow to brown. Their unusual trait is their ability to walk forward, sideways or backwards.

## Web builders

Minnesota's web-building spiders can be divided into three categories: comb-footed, orb and grass spiders.

**Grass spiders:** Create large webs on plants or buildings. They are typically brown or gray with light markings on their heads.

**Orb spiders:** Are easy to identify by their large, swollen abdomen. They can be brightly colored or have bright markings. They are rarely found indoors, but may be found on the exterior of buildings. They build large, round webs.

**Comb-footed spiders:** Are

small to medium-sized spiders that may be found indoors or outdoors. They are dark in color, typically brown or gray. They build their irregular-shaped webs in a wide range of areas from plants to window wells.

## Biting spiders

People fear being bitten by spiders, but only a small number are capable of biting humans and only a few are poisonous to humans.

The common sac spider, which is found in Minnesota, can bite, but it is not deadly. None of Min-

## Learn more about the Minnesota Conservation Federation...

*Dedicated to hunters, anglers and others who value our natural resources!*

Visit our website at [www.mncf.org](http://www.mncf.org)

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