

Evolution of a Spider Keeper

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I moved my *Poecilotheria regalis* today. No racing heart, no gloves, didn't even have the wife standing by ready to call 911. Oh, I was careful, I just wasn't terrified. It wouldn't have been like this two years ago. That's because I've become more confident in my abilities. More aware of my spider's habits. Similar to mankind I've evolved. I've gone through several evolutionary stages as I've kept tarantulas.

Newbie John (Stage 1).

At this stage, I was very unsure of what I was doing. It seemed for every answer I got to a question, more questions were raised. This spider's not eating, can this spider eat too much? This spider moves all the time, this spider doesn't move at all. How wet? How dry? Are you sure a spiderling is suppose to be this small?

I inhaled books. Sam Marshall's book, the Schultz's guide, Baxter's book. I ordered back issues of the Forum. I found email lists. I read, I lurked, and I asked questions. I grew. I bought more tarantulas.

The question I heard most at home was "Are you sure you need another spider?" I was sure every tarantula I owned, whether a spiderling or an adult, could sense my fear and would dash out of any container when opened in a blur of whirling legs. I was confidently using ice tongs to drop crickets into my containers. Oh, at this stage I was also naming my tarantulas, Rosie, Digger, Bee Vagans, etc. This practice stopped fairly soon after my

collection grew to twenty pets. I was also sure I will never, ever order one of those aggressive spiders.

Overconfident John (Stage 2).

This is the stage where I shared my new hobby with all my friends and gushed when I told them of successful molts. I'm the one who wrote that two-page email on watching my adult Chilean rose tarantula molt from beginning to end. The list members were very polite but I'm sure they were bored to death. I learned to buy crickets by mail order. I felt a little full of myself as I lurk on several lists reading newbie questions (that I was just asking myself several months before). I now had twenty tarantulas of various sizes and even an "Usambara" that I got as a freebie. I now leave the plastic flip lid open while I took out water dishes or drop in crickets. I now knew my *Brachypelma smithi* and Rosie and the other "rocks" will not going to rush out to attack my throat. In fact, I can take the Pet Pal lid completely off which made changing water much easier.

At this stage I did all my container transfers in the bathtub. My first really aggressive spider, a one-half inch *Haplopelma lividum* had arrived and I was ready to do the transfer. This experience almost sent me back to stage one. I had already moved several spiderlings using the gentle paint brush method and believed I knew what I was doing. After all, the spiderlings had been cooperating, slowly strolling from small shipping vial to deli cup with no problem. (overconfident here).

I was ready. Ten gallon empty aquarium, deli-cup with peat moss, paintbrush in hand, spiderling in shipping vial. Unfortunately this *H. lividum* had other thoughts about cooperating. The first touch of the brush produced a blur, over the edge of the vial, down the side, across the floor of the aquarium and up the side. I barely managed to slap a large piece of cardboard on the aquarium top preventing an escape. Of course, now I had a one inch spiderling wedged between the cardboard and the aquarium edge. I was completely convinced this spider would deliberately choose to run up my arm and bite me on the neck if I lift up the cardboard. Twelve hours later, after several frantic emails to several lists for advice, I managed to cover the spiderling as it was exploring the aquarium in the dark. Whew! Surely this experience moved me into the next stage.

Not-so-newbie John (Stage 3).

I branched out into Old World spiders as my confidence grew. I now had spiderlings of *Poecilotheria regalis*, *Poecilotheria fasciata*, *Haplopelma minax*, and *Ceratogyrus cornuatus*. And I've shipped off my first male for breeding! I'm learning more each day how they behave and react to me. Surely, I'm a spiderkeeper now.

Well, not quite. I had a *Brachypelma* sp. "pallidum" in my classroom that I'd bought as a two inch immature and had seen it through several successful molts. One day after lunch, I discovered "Digger" trapped upside down, caught in her own web, struggling to get free. Oh no, I must help this spider free itself, I thought. Off comes the lid, snip, snip, snip go the scissors, freedom. As I was relating this strange experience over the weekend to the Internet list, Raven suggested that perhaps Digger was not trapped at all but had been making a sperm web. Indignantly I insisted that this wasn't possible. Digger was much

too young and a female at that! My face was as red as an Arizona sunset.

Monday morning I observed that Digger had spurs and loaded palps. Digger was sent to California as I was apologizing to Raven. Lesson learned.

I attended the ATS conference in June of 1999. I learned so much about sexing from molts, behavior in the wild, handling tarantulas, and giving my own presentation, that I moved from Stage 3 to Stage 4.

Comfortable John (Stage 4)

Stage 4 has been the "I'm now going to try breeding" stage. My very first tarantula, a spiderling *Grammostola rosea*, molted out as a male. I had an adult female, Rosie, (named when I was in Stage 1) and I'd read lots of books so I was ready. There were a few anxious moments that night as Spider Ling slowly moved towards Rosie. Finally, with a little encouragement via the paintbrush there was the flailing of legs and the mad dash away signaling success. (I hope). That was in June. Since then I have successfully bred *Brachypelma vagans* and *Aphonopelma seemanni*. Now, I'm waiting for the eggsacs. Another Stage 4 behavior is hoping that at least one of my *Brachypelma emilia* spiderlings is a male and the same goes for my *Acanthoscurria geniculata*. Stage 1 and Stage 2 keepers never hope for males.

Stage 4 is a great place to be. I've learned so many things along the way. I'm comfortable, yet cautious with my spiders. I've learned to raise my own crickets. I've shipped some males from here to there. Most importantly, I've made many fine friends. As Stage 5 is reserved for only a few master keepers I think I'll be here and happy quite a while.