

Care guide

Redback, *Latrodectus hasselti*



Redbacks are iconic Australian spiders. They are found Australia wide in suitable habitats which seem to be everywhere except the humid tropical rainforests and the cool alpine zones. They shelter beneath objects in dry dark places, and thrive within human inhabited areas due to the abundance of shelter.

Redback spiders are well known for their powerfully toxic venom, yet much of the arsenal used to subdue larger prey is not in the bite. These spiders are instinctive engineers with doctorates in snares, entrapment and weight transfer. Its web consists of two distinct components and usually connects with the ground (or some other base). It may be created in a very small space, or span distances of up to 50cm. The upper component of the web provides structural support for the trap and usually includes a thickened area of silk where the spider lives. The lower component of the web consists of a number of vertical trip-lines. Each line connects with the ground under great tension, and is adorned with droplets of liquid silk which acts as an instant glue for any creature that touches it. These strong webs allow Redbacks to capture prey much larger than themselves.

Breeding may occur year round. The tiny males are often eaten after mating. Females can produce multiple egg sacs from a single mating, sometimes more than ten. Each sac is pale yellow or white in colour and contains hundreds of eggs. The spiderlings emerge around 30 days later and within days are constructing their own snares to capture prey.

These spiders grow by shedding their outer skeleton (exoskeleton). This process is called ecdysis or moulting and takes place within the web. They stop feeding a few days before moulting, and once they begin to moult they usually complete the process in about 10 minutes. They usually will not feed for a couple of days after moulting. Males and females can be identified easily; males have enlarged bulbs on the ends of their pedipalps (feelers) and only reach around 5mm in body length. Females continue to grow into the adult form pictured above, however are quite colourful - white, orange and black as they develop.

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Food: Live crawling insects; crickets, beetles and cockroaches are ideal. Feeding once a week is recommended, but young spiders may feed more often when they are growing. Remove live insects from your enclosure if your spider is not hungry.

Water: Redbacks require very little water. Mist spray lightly within the spider's web once a week at most – it will drink the droplets if required. Redbacks don't like damp humid conditions, so ensure watering is not excessive.

Enclosure: Enclosure should be escape proof and have sufficient space for the spider to construct its web and trap snares. A small terrarium or large jar is sufficient, however larger enclosures will allow the spider to create larger webs. Redbacks will often create their retreats upon the ceiling of the enclosure unless better options are included within the enclosure such as flat bark or small hollow logs. Large ventilation holes should be covered by mesh, however emergent spiderlings can escape through standard fly mesh, so finer mesh is required if breeding this species.

Temperature: This species is very tolerant of a wide range of temperatures (10 – 30°C) but will do best at temperatures around 20°. Avoid prolonged exposure to extreme temperatures at either end of the range.

Life span: 1-2 years.

Handling: Do not directly handle these spiders as they have very potent venom and bites can cause serious systemic effects. If you need to transfer them, they can be easily guided into a jar or plastic container using long forceps or other handling apparatus.

Reproduction: Adult males will mate with adult females at any time of the year in captivity. Pairing them usually is as simple as releasing the male at the edge of the females' web so that he can make his own way towards her. Cramped conditions may lead to the female consuming the male before mating occurs. The male will need to climb under the female to mate using his pedipalps. Mating may continue intermittently for hours, and may result in the male being consumed at the conclusion. The female will produce an egg sac anywhere from days to weeks after mating. The time between mating and egg deposition can vary dependant on the age of the female, her condition and the temperature she is being kept at. If well fed she may continue to produce an egg sac every few weeks thereafter.

Common issues: Redbacks will often reside on the underside of enclosure lids – use extreme care when opening your enclosure. These spiders have very strong silk and may attach them to utensils, enabling them to climb along the attached silk line.

NOTE: Redback spiders are highly venomous and should only be kept by responsible mature and experienced keepers. Medical attention should be sought immediately in the case of a bite.

These animals are captive bred, and should not be released into the wild.

For more information contact Minibeast Wildlife at info@minibeastwildlife.com.au