SHORT COMMUNICATION

An Infestation of 2,055 Brown Recluse Spiders (Araneae: Sicariidae) and No Envenomations in a Kansas Home: Implications for Bite Diagnoses in Nonendemic Areas

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ABSTRACT During a 6-mo period, 2,055 brown recluse spiders, *Loxosceles reclusa* Gertsch and Mulaik, were collected in a 19th-century-built, currently occupied home in Lenexa, KS. We conservatively estimate that at least 400 of these spiders were large enough to cause envenomation. Additional collections from more typically infested homes in Missouri and Oklahoma in 2001 yielded 45 and 30 brown recluse spiders, respectively. Despite these infestations, no envenomations of the inhabitants of these three homes occurred. Considering the levels of infestations with no bites in the homes presented here, nonendemic areas in the United States, which typically lack recluse spider populations and have had zero to few verified specimens of the spider, do not have sufficient numbers of brown recluse spiders to make envenomation a likely scenario. Despite this, physicians from nonendemic recluse areas often diagnose brown recluse bites which, therefore, are unlikely to be correct.

KEY WORDS *Loxosceles reclusa*, *Arachnida*, synanthropy

THE BROWN RECLUSE SPIDER, *Loxosceles reclusa* Gertsch and Mulaik, is well known by the medical community and general public to cause dermonecrotic lesions. Although the spiders are virtually limited to their endemic range (southeastern Nebraska to Texas, east to southernmost Ohio and Georgia) (Gertsch and Ennik 1983; Vetter 2000a, 2000b), brown recluse bites are diagnosed throughout North America, typically based solely on clinical examination with no evidence of spider involvement (Vetter and Bush 2002a). The brown recluse is then incorrectly perceived to be common, widely dispersed, and a frequent cause of dermonecrosis throughout North America (Vetter 2000b; Vetter and Bush 2002a, 2000b). In contrast, the distributional evidence resoundingly refutes this notion. This misconception is a source of consternation for arachnologists in nonendemic recluse areas attempting to educate nonarachnologists about the local absence of *Loxosceles* spiders, often to no avail. This heightened awareness of brown recluse spiders has caused physicians in nonendemic regions to locally diagnose more bites annually than the historic total of verified specimens found in the same area (Vetter 2000b; Edwards 2001; Vetter and Bush 2002a, 2000b), giving a low probability of a diagnosis being correct.

Despite the high-profile infamy of the brown recluse spider, there is a paucity of original comprehensive natural history research on the spider (i.e., most available information is a reiteration of a few earlier studies). Hite et al. (1966) and Horner and Stewart (1967) are commonly cited sources, although their studies have dealt more with the life history characteristics of the spider than its synanthropic relationship (i.e., association with humans). Hite et al. (1966) mentions that many brown recluse spiders were found in homes, churches, schools, and other structures, but do not delineate the number of structures or the methods of collection. The only quantified references of brown recluse synanthropy of which we are aware include Cross (1971), who collected 52 spiders on two occasions in several buildings at a dilapidated, rural Mississippi homesite and Gooch (1999) mentions 44 being caught in sticky traps in 24 h under one couch in Memphis, TN, and another 300 collected in a Texas home although without mention of the collection period. Medical and public literature often emphasizes the rare, deleterious, and horrific aspects of brown recluse venom toxicology, inflating the spider’s propensity for causing dermonecrotic damage. It is rarely pointed out that most brown recluse spider bites have inconsequential resolution (Wright et al. 1997, Cacy and Mold 1999). In this study, we offer what we feel is a more common yet neglected life history characteristic: in endemic areas, brown recluse spiders can be very abundant in homes with no envenomations of the occupants.

Materials and Methods

This report centers around the extraordinary collection of brown recluse spiders from a heavily infested home in Lenexa, KS, ∼33 km southwest of Lenexa, KS 66227.
Kansas City. The house was originally constructed in the 1850s of 45-cm-thick exterior limestone walls and consists of three floors encompassing 270 m² of living space. Attic space adjoins east and west second floor walls with another attic above, all with floors covered with 8 cm of blown insulation. The roof has original wood shingles covered by three layers of asphalt shingles. House additions were made during the 1920s and in the 1960–1970s; the first addition enclosed an exterior wall. Interior stone walls are covered with plaster. There are several outbuildings, including a horse barn, chicken coop, garage, and open-sided hay barn. This home is on 4 ha of property surrounded by trees and pasture, 0.2 km away from the nearest neighbor. As a historic note, it reputedly served as the residence of Wild Bill Hickok during the mid-19th century.

A homeowner from Tulsa, OK, contacted R.S.V. in November 2001 as the study was about to be terminated. Her 167-m² home is situated on a 1-ha property and was built in 1963 on poured concrete foundation with one floor and no basement but with a storm shelter connected to the back porch and a barn with one horse. It is in a semirural area bordered by smaller lot housing and a 40-ha farm. The current inhabitants (one parent and three children, ages 7, 11, and 17 in 1997) have occupied the home since 1997. The homeowner sent R.S.V. several sticky traps [three Stick-em glue traps (flat-tray style), model 122, J.T. Eaton, Twinsburg, OH, and two Victor mouse glue traps (triangular tent style), Woodstream, Lititz, PA], which were deployed in 2001, plus a few spiders collected after a pesticide treatment. Five additional spiders killed or preserved earlier in the year were tallied. Many additional dead brown recluse specimens were not collected from the storm shelter because of mold encrustation and fragile condition.

Results

In the Lenexa, KS, home, 2,055 brown recluse spiders were collected or killed in 6 mo, 842 from sticky traps and 1,213 from manual sampling (Table 1). Of the 1,179 manually collected brown recluse spiders sorted into size categories, there were 323 large (27.4%), 255 medium (21.6%), and 601 small spiders (51.0%) (Table 1; Fig. 1). There was a proportional decrease in large and medium manually sampled spiders as the year progressed (Fig. 1). Sticky traps yielded a very high percentage of small spiders, most being second-instar spiderlings (Table 1) but also retained 51 large and medium spiders, at least 25 of which were adults.

Of the 1,213 manually sampled brown recluse spiders, 90 (52.2% of which were large) were found during incidental encounters, occurring in every room in the house including high human use areas such as bedrooms, kitchen, and bathroom. These encounters included one large recluse crawling up an arm as stored bedding was shoved into a washing machine, a medium recluse crawling on a person in bed, and a medium recluse crawling on a finger when picking up clothing. Despite the high density of brown recluses, none of the four family members has ever shown...
evidence of a recluse bite, either during the duration of the study or in 6 yr of home occupancy.

From the Missouri home, 45 brown recluses were collected. Using the size categories determined for the Kansas home, there were 21 large, 16 medium, and 8 small spiders including 7 mature males and 19 mature females. Many of these were caught in sticky traps and one mature female dropped on the homeowner’s arm while dressing. From the Oklahoma home, 30 brown recluse spiders were trapped or killed in 2001. Of the 20 measurable spiders in sticky traps that could be delegated to a size category as detailed above, there were 12 large, 6 medium, and 2 small spiders. None of the four family members of either home experienced bites during the duration (2 yr and 4 yr, respectively) of home occupancy.

**Discussion**

The Kansas home produced an amazing number of brown recluse spiders in 6 mo of collecting. The decrease in large and medium spiders from early to late season (Fig. 1) was probably a result of the natural demographic development through the season and the removal of larger specimens that were easier to detect and capture. Brown recluse spiders can live several years (Hite et al. 1966, Horner and Stewart 1967), so the latter reason may be more critical in explaining the proportional dwindling of the large and medium spiders. Sticky traps were more effective in removing small spiders compared with manual sampling (Table 1). In the Missouri and Oklahoma homes, a moderate amount of brown recluse spiders were collected but this is probably within the realm of the total brown recluses found annually by the average homeowner having infestations of the spider.

To assess the potential health risk in the Kansas home, we chose the mid range of medium brown recluse spiders (approximately 5 mm in body length) as the size threshold for envenomation capability. This size threshold was chosen based on unpublished data by R.S.V. that indicate that non-*Loxosceles* spiders 5 mm in body length have caused verified envenomations. The maximum estimate of the number of potentially bite-capable spiders in this highly infested home is 488 spiders (i.e., all large plus one half of the medium spiders that were segregated by size; Table 1). Despite a conservative estimate of 400 envenomation-capable brown recluses in the Kansas home (≈20% of the total recluses captured), no envenomations of the occupants occurred. Similarly, in a Chilean survey, the five most heavily infested domiciles averaged 163 *L. laeta* spiders, ranging from 106 to 222 potentially dangerous spiders with no reports of envenomations from these homes (Schenone et al. 1970).

**Table 1.** Brown recluse spiders from the Lenexa, KS, home that were sorted by size category by D.K.B. in Kansas (hand-sampled). Sticky trap spiders were measured with a microscope by R.S.V. and then assigned to size category as determined by the hand-collected subsamples. An additional 34 spiders were collected and discarded prior to size categorization.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Subsample measures</th>
<th>Small</th>
<th>Medium</th>
<th>Large</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Cephalothorax length of category (mm)</td>
<td>1.24 ± 0.38</td>
<td>2.74 ± 0.40</td>
<td>3.60 ± 0.45</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Subsample size</td>
<td>61</td>
<td>39</td>
<td>23</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

![Fig. 1. Demographics of brown recluse spiders manually captured per wk in the Lenexa, KS, home. Decreases for the wk of 22 July and 12 August were a result of 4-d vacancies of the house. After mid-September, collections became intermittent as spider populations diminished and collecting frequency decreased.](https://academic.oup.com/jme/article-abstract/39/6/948/862215)
Considering the number of brown recluse spiders found in the homes in this study without envenomation, for bite diagnoses in nonendemic recluse territory to be correct, nonendemic areas would need to support hundreds to thousands of brown recluse spiders. In contrast, in nonendemic areas, typically no brown recluse populations are known and verified finds are <10 per state (Gertsch and Ennik 1983, Vetter and Bush 2002b, R.S.V. et al. unpublished data).

Current emerging research is showing that many medical afflictions manifest in dermatologic lesions that are misdiagnosed as brown recluse bites (Russell and Gertsch 1983; Russell 1986; Vetter and Visscher 1998; Vetter 2000a, 2000b; Roche et al. 2001; Osterhoudt et al. 2002; Vetter and Bush 2002a, 2002c). In nonendemic recluse areas, more proof of recluse involvement (i.e., verification of Loxosceles spiders at the specific alleged envenomation locale) should be required before the wound is attributed to brown recluse spiders.

Acknowledgments

We thank G. Z. Stephen Klump (Des Peres, MO) and Carol Kuplicki (Tulsa, OK) for providing the brown recluse data from their homes, and Dale, Bradley, and Brenna Barger (Lenexa, KS) for their assistance and tolerance during the course of the study.

References Cited


Received for publication 18 March 2002, accepted 31 July 2002.