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# CITIZEN TIMES

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## WORD FROM THE SMOKIES



A bold jumping spider (*Phidippus audax*) perches on a fallen leaf. These small hunting spiders are shy toward humans, but hunt their prey, pouncing from a great distance. PROVIDED BY CHRISTOPHER CANNON

# Wait, don't kill it! Spiders protect us from disease

Frances Figart

Special to Asheville Citizen Times  
USA TODAY NETWORK

Although the word “spider” may elicit a “yuck” or an “ew” from many readers, the true nature of these oft-feared critters is not as icky as one might suppose. Arachnids provide essential services for humans and play key roles in balancing our ecosystems by keeping herbivorous insects in check.

“Without spiders we would probably succumb to some nasty insect-borne disease while waiting to starve to death,” said Kefyn Catley, who has studied the evolutionary biology of spiders on four continents and spent years teaching and conducting research as a professor of biology at Western Carolina University. Some of his work has been done in Great Smoky Mountains National Park, whose boundary is within a 45-minute drive of WCU. Researchers have thus far recorded 553 species of spiders in the park, 43 of them new to science.

Three of these species were discovered in 2023, when researchers Marshal Hedin and Marc Milne published their comprehensive study of one Appalachian spider genus: *Nesticus*, a group commonly referred to as the scaffold web or cave cobweb spiders. In their 130-page scientific paper tracking the evolution of the *Nesticus* genus, Hedin and Milne describe a total of ten spider species that were new to science—never documented before. Three of these exist in the Smokies, and they were named to honor writer Wilma Dykeman (*Nesticus dykemanae*), arachnologist Dr. Greta Binford (*Nesticus binfordae*), and the Cherokee people (*Nesticus cherokeensis*).

Spiders are part of a larger group of



Author Wilma Dykeman, namesake of a new spider species (*Nesticus dykemanae*) identified in 2023, spent her early years at her family's home just outside Asheville. PROVIDED BY STATE ARCHIVES OF NORTH CAROLINA

species called arthropods, which Catley—who holds a PhD in arthropod systematics from Cornell University—describes as the little and largely unseen creatures that run the world. This group of animals includes insects, crustaceans, springtails, millipedes, centipedes, and arachnids, such as spiders. All members of the arthropod phylum are invertebrates with external skeletons, segmented bodies, and jointed appendages. Over half of the species documented in the park are arthropods. “Arthropods provide the life support systems that humans and the whole terrestrial biosphere rely on for their continued existence,” he said. “Without them it has been estimated that almost all life on land—including humans—would go extinct in nine months.”

Spiders have two main body parts and two unique characteristics: silk produced through “spinnerets” located

at the tip of the abdomen, and the male “pedipalp” as an organ for transferring sperm to the female.

“Spiders have an ancient lineage originating some 400 million years ago,” Catley said. “They are the largest and most important group of predators on the planet.”

These tiny creatures regulate all our land-based ecological systems by controlling herbivorous insect populations. It is estimated that the spiders on about two acres of forest in Western North Carolina can consume 48 metric tons (105,840 pounds) of insects in a year.

“Spiders also provide us with excellent models for studying ecology, biochemistry, competition, and sexual selection, among other fields,” said Catley, who is retired but still teaches courses on spider biology and insect

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# Feds to distribute \$155M for NC Helene recovery

George Fabe Russell  
Hendersonville Times-News  
USA TODAY NETWORK

The U.S. Department of Homeland Security, which encompasses FEMA, has released a breakdown of how the \$155 million in disaster assistance announced Nov. 4 will be distributed for debris removal and other recovery from Tropical Storm Helene in North Carolina.

Henderson County will receive \$14.8 million to pay for work including removal of almost 75,000 cubic yards of debris, according to a Nov. 7 Department of Homeland Security news release.

Buncombe County is set to receive \$9.6 million for emergency protective measure, private property debris removal and road repairs, it said.

Helene devastated Western North Carolina last September, killing more than 100 people, damaging or destroying thousands of homes and causing \$60 billion in damage to roads, businesses and other infrastructure.

The \$14.8 million from FEMA will go towards paying off \$13.2 million in waterway debris removal and \$1.6 million

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# ‘Not one decent cell in his body’

Epstein trashed former friend Trump in emails

Josh Meyer  
USA TODAY

WASHINGTON – “Dirty.” “(Expletive) crazy.” “Borderline insane.” A Mafia don but with the “great dangerous power” of being America’s president and commander-in-chief.

That’s how the late Jeffrey Epstein described his former longtime friend and confidant Donald Trump, according to a trove of the convicted sex offender’s texts and emails released Nov. 12 by the House Oversight Committee.

But perhaps the most intriguing thing Epstein said about Trump in the 20,000-plus pages of emails provided by his estate was this:

“I am the one able to take him down.”

The White House and Trump himself tried to spin the document release – and a later one by Republicans – as being a giant nothingburger.

See EPSTEIN, Page 2A





MOUNTAINS

NC towns on list of best places to visit for Thanksgiving

Iris Seaton  
Asheville Citizen Times  
USA TODAY NETWORK

With a few weeks left until Thanksgiving, Southern Living has released a list of eight best places to spend the holiday this year, including two locations in North Carolina.

“For some, the long weekend is spent visiting family or friends; others might be more inclined to ring in the festivities in a new town or city, or by the pool at a resort they return to year after year,” Southern Living writers said of Thanksgiving weekend.

The list of eight destinations, curated by travel industry experts, includes “everything from mountain getaways and beach escapes to small-town celebrations and five-star relaxation.” In North Carolina, Southern Living chose one location in the Western region of the state and another in the Piedmont.

Here’s what writers said on the two locations, plus the full list from Southern Living.

**Asheville Thanksgiving travel: Where is Asheville in North Carolina?**

Though Southern Living praised Asheville as “one of those destinations that can be enjoyed year-round,” writers added that it’s “particularly cozy around the holidays.”

In particular, Southern Living writers loved the Biltmore Estate’s holiday festivities.

“I love the idea of celebrating inside America’s Largest Home, surrounded by candlelight, early Christmas decorations, and that unmistakable sense of warmth that only the Biltmore seems to capture,” said travel expert Casey Keller for Southern Living.

Keller also praised Asheville’s scenic

mountain hikes, cozy cafes and “welcoming small-city charm” that “makes the whole experience feel grounded and genuine.”

**Pinehurst, North Carolina, Thanksgiving travel: Where is Pinehurst?**

“For me, Pinehurst strikes the perfect balance between tradition and innovation,” said Keller for Southern Living. “You can sip tea while listening to a quartet in The Carolina Hotel one moment and golf the next. Surrounded by the charm of the Village of Pinehurst and wrapped in genuine hospitality, it is an easy place to slow down, reconnect, and celebrate Thanksgiving the way it was meant to be.”

Southern Living also praised Pinehurst Resort as “an especially exciting place to be for the big day,” with Thanksgiving celebrations Wednesday, includ-

ing details like afternoon tea and cookies, live string music, a fireside s’mores social by the pool, and further choices on Thanksgiving Day, including food, hot cider stations, family game rooms and more.

**Best Thanksgiving travel in the South**

Southern Living’s full list of best Thanksgiving travel destinations in the South included:

- Charleston, South Carolina
- Blackberry Farm, Tennessee
- Williamsburg, Virginia
- Naples, Florida
- Asheville
- Sea Island, Georgia
- Pinehurst
- Bluffton, S.C.

Iris Seaton is the trending news reporter for the Asheville Citizen Times, part of the USA TODAY Network.

Spiders

Continued from Page 1A

photography. “They contribute to research in pest control, venom chemistry, and the cloning of silk.”

Even though spiders offer all these benefits, many people are afraid of all spiders because a few have harmful bites. Catley pointed out that less than one percent of spider species are toxic to humans. These species are not poisonous; they are venomous (poison is ingested; venom is injected). Catley said the evolution of venom is one of two innovations (the other being silk) that makes spiders the hugely successful group they are. Most spiders produce venom that paralyzes their prey and starts the process of digestion by break-

ing down cells and tissue.

Through the brown recluse is found in other areas of this region, the only spider native to the park that—very rarely—envenomates humans is the black widow. Fortunately, like most spiders, these are shy and retiring and do not threaten humans.

Between 1979 and 1991, the United States saw 1,135 deaths attributed to lightning strikes, 591 attributed to bee stings, 72 to snake bites, and 57 to alleged spider bites—but as many as 80 percent of spider bites are wrongly diagnosed. This translates to a 20 times greater chance of being struck and killed by lightning than being killed by a spider!

“The vast majority of spiders are in fact greatly important to humans, consuming 400 to 800 million metric tons of insects per year,” said Hedin, one of

the researchers who documented the new spider species. “Of course, many of these insects that spiders consume would be somehow harmful to people, consuming crops or vectoring disease. In this way, spiders are the ultimate predators of many pestiferous insects; this is what they evolved to do!”

As most everyone knows, spiders also make silks that are remarkable biomaterials, and with help from human ingenuity they may provide solutions to many of the problems we face today. Spider silks are already being used in biomedicine.

“In the end,” Hedin said, “spiders are in fact immensely beneficial to humans. Plus, they are just remarkable little animals, and often quite beautiful.”

Some spiders, like the cellar and parson varieties, live with us indoors all year round. If you protect your living

space from pesticides, these constant companions will be at your service, significantly reducing your undesirable insect populations.

So, what should you do if you see a spider in your home? Catch it with a cup and postcard and put it out—or simply let it be.

*This story is adapted from earlier “Word from the Smokies” stories that were originally published on September 19, 2020, and August 5, 2023, in the Asheville Citizen-Times.*

Frances Figart is the creative services director for the 29,000-member Smokies Life, a partner supporting Great Smoky Mountains National Park by providing educational products and services such as this column. Learn more at SmokiesLife.org and reach the author at frances@smokieslife.org .



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