



BROWN WIDOW SPIDER

The Brown Widow spider is the only known poisonous spider on the island. It is found on Prosperous Bay Plain and across the Eastern Arid Area from the Plain across to Horse Point. They have also been found in the Millennium Forest.

The spiders are nocturnal and will usually only appear during the day when disturbed. This spider is present in the rocky habitat of Prosperous Bay Plain, as it is a web-building spider. All female widows can inflict a poisonous bite on people, though the severity varies among the species. The Brown Widow is less poisonous than the Black Widow, but a bite is still to be taken seriously. Male widows do not bite people.

Brown Widow Spiders usually curl up into a ball, and drop to the ground as a primary defence. The only time that a Brown Widow Spider will definitely try to bite someone, is if she is guarding her egg sac. Large female specimens are normally found in cavities under rocks of substantial size, but sometimes under overhangs or in burrows in sandy or muddy soil. The spider maintains a network of threads around its retreat, often leading to another rock a meter or so away. At night, and occasionally during the day, females can be found hanging upside down from their webs in the open, showing the orange hour-glass mark on the underside of the abdomen. This behaviour makes walking in the eastern arid area somewhat hazardous at night, since a spider caught up in clothing or boots might be inclined to bite.

We must stress that when visiting Prosperous Bay Plain there is a need to be cautious.

Although the Brown Widow only viciously attacks when disturbed, it would be in your best interest not to move or turn over any rocks when visiting the Plain. If there is a need to pick up rocks, don't put your hand underneath them. Avoid sticky webs and wear gloves, and long trousers tucked into boots as a precaution.



Above:
Widow Spider with egg sac

Restricted Vehicular Access in Central Basin

Please note that the area known as the Central Basin at Prosperous Bay Plain is out of bounds to all vehicular traffic. Please see the Press Release on Page ? for further details.

Marine Team Moves to EMD

We would like to announce that the Marine Section previously from ANRD is now officially a part of the Environmental Management Directorate and should be moving to Essex House soon. We would like to take this opportunity to welcome them to the new Directorate.

Date for your diary

Reserve the 12th April 2012 in your diary. This day is dedicated to the official launch of our new Environmental Management Directorate and will take place in the Courtyard of Essex House. Members of the public are invited to attend from 1:30pm. More details on the days events will be published soon.

MASKED BOOBIES SUCCESS

Many of you have probably heard about the success of Masked Boobies nesting in the area of Lots Wife, and a paper documenting the colonisation of the St Helena mainland, and subsequent successful breeding, of Masked Boobies, has just been published in the journal "Seabird", which is great news for our island.

Masked Boobies were apparently extremely abundant on St Helena in the early sixteenth century, when the island was discovered. It is probable that the breeding population was severely depleted by man and introduced mammalian predators following human settlement of the island in 1659. The species had certainly become very scarce by the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, restricted to a few small offshore stacks that remained predator-free. Since that time, the population has increased substantially, and the first instance of breeding on the St Helena mainland, despite the presence of Feral Cats, Brown Rats, and Black Rats was reported in 2009 by Andrew Darlow and Lourens Malan.

Colonisation by Masked Boobies of the St Helena mainland could result from a recent population increase, leading to scarcity of suitable nesting sites on the small offshore stacks for new recruits. Unfortunately, there is no survey data available for the two years leading up to the mainland colonisation, but monthly counts of the number of Apparently Incubating Adult and apparently occupied nest sites on Shore Island showed a significant decrease in the breeding population between October 2004 and July 2007.

Now, seabird monitoring is conducted at the site of Lots Wife once a month by the Marine Section, along with Ivan Henry and Graham Sim. There are approximately 150 birds in the area of Lots Wife and around 60 nests along the ridge area. With the colony still in its establishment phase it is difficult to discern laying phenology with certainty, but there appears to be two peaks of egg-laying, one in July-August and a second in November.

The successful recolonisation and breeding of Masked Boobies may result from lowered densities of cats locally, or increased availability of alternative, more easily subdued, prey. However, without quantitative information on historic and current densities of cats, or the availability of alternative prey, it is not possible to say with certainty whether the recent mainland colonisation represents a response to reduced cat predation pressure on the mainland.



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