

THE AUSTRALIAN REDBACK SPIDER - AN UNWELCOME IMMIGRANT
TO NEW ZEALAND

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Closely related to the American 'black widow' and the New Zealand 'katipo', the Australian 'redback' spider *Latrodectus hasselti* has been finding its way into this country with increasing frequency. In the last year three fully grown females have been found by accident apparently living in the wild in central Otago. Since it is extremely unlikely that three such spiders, having successfully made their way to this country, should then all be found, it is reasonable to assume that one or more colonies have become established somewhere.

The latest find, a gravid female, was uncovered by someone collecting rocks near Wanaka for his rockery. Shortly after capture, it laid an egg sac, from which 110 spiderlings later emerged.

These spiderlings are being reared at different temperatures and it is clear that the rate of development is greatly affected by this variable. It is also evident that they can withstand sub-zero temperatures since fifteen spiderlings in tubes placed outside (in Dunedin) and fed occasionally with fruitflies are still very much alive. Another fifteen, similarly treated but which were not fed, died after about five weeks; there seems little doubt however that they died of starvation and not of the cold. These studies suggest that these spiderlings would have survived in Wanaka provided that they had found suitable shelter and were able to obtain an occasional meal. One criterion for the establishment of redbacks in this area would seem to relate to whether the summer is warm enough for them to breed and not on whether they can live through the winter.

Distinguishing between the katipo and redback is a difficult task for persons unfamiliar with spiders. Anyone finding a spider which is suspected of being a redback is asked to post it to me together with date and details of the find (locality, habitat, circumstances etc.,) The best procedure is to put it in a plastic jar containing a firmly wedged twig to which the spider can cling.

In general, differences between the redback and the katipo include

- (1) size (the redback is half as big again as the katipo).
- (2) hair-covering (the redback is covered with two kinds of hair - short and fine, large and coarse: the katipo has only short, fine hairs.)
- (3) habitat (the redback can live in any arid sheltered, inland area whereas the katipo is confined to coastal regions.)

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