

Colorado Arthropod of Interest

Parson Spiders

Scientific Name: *Herpyllus* species

Order: Araneae (Spiders)

Family: Gnaphosidae (Ground Spiders)

Identification and Descriptive Features: The parson spiders are moderately large spiders (female 6.5-13mm; male 4.5-6.5mm) with overall black color. A broken white or silvery stripe prominently marks the back of the abdomen. (This marking is reminiscent of the old style neck band cravat formerly worn by parsons and others of the ministry.) A wide shiny band of reflective silvery hairs occurs on the cephalothorax. The legs that are brown, banded with black and relatively long; parson spiders are fast runners.

Distribution in Colorado: Four species are known from Colorado: *Herpyllus bubulcus*, *H. ecclesiasticus* (**eastern parson spider**), *H. hesperolus*, and *H. propinquus* (**western parson spider**). At least one *Herpyllus* species can likely be found in any Colorado county and human-assisted transfers of these spiders is likely common.

Life History and Habits: Parson spiders can be common invaders of buildings in late summer and early fall. Indoors they may be found crawling on walls and they can move quickly, often running in a zig-zag pattern. They do not breed indoors.

The parson spiders are active at night and in twilight hours. During the day they seek cover provided by loose bark, boards or other sheltering sites and often form a silken retreat within which they rest.

Life history is poorly known. Eggs of at least some species are produced in late summer and early fall. However, a mixture of life stages can occur over winter suggesting a two year life cycle is possible.



Figures 1, 2. Top and side views of two different species of parson spider (*Herpyllus* spp.). Lower photograph courtesy of David Shetlar, The Ohio State University.



Figure 3. A photo-montage illustration of a parson spider. Photograph courtesy of David Shetlar, The Ohio State University.

Medical Importance: Occasional bites by parson spiders have been reported when they were accidentally handled or confined in clothing. The bite is mild producing localized inflammation but wounds heal quickly (if not infected) with no permanent effects.

Similar Species: Parson spiders are in the spider family Gnaphosidae, the ground spiders. Most species in this family remain outdoors, hiding under debris on the surface and hunting at night on the ground. Infrequently ground spiders in the genera *Drassodes* and *Zelotes* will wander into buildings in Colorado.



Figure 4. A ground spider of the genus *Zelotes*. These are one of the few shiny black spiders that may be found in a home, along with the western widow. This spider is harmless.



Figure 5. A ground spider of the genus *Drassodes*.