

Are brown widows displacing black widow spiders around southern California homes?

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Brown widow spiders are relatively new to North America, where they were first documented in Florida in 1935, and even newer to southern California, where they were only recently discovered in 2003. However, in the last decade they have been so successful that they may be displacing native black widow spiders. If so, the overall danger to homeowners may decrease because brown widow spider bites are less toxic than those of native western black widow spiders.

In "The Prevalence of Brown Widow and [Black Widow](#) Spiders (Araneae: Theridiidae) in Urban Southern California," a soon-to-be-released article in the July issue of the *Journal of Medical Entomology*, the authors describe the results of their efforts to document the presence of brown widows in southern California by performing timed searches in various habitats, such as urban properties, [agricultural lands](#), developed parks, and undeveloped [natural areas](#). They also included the native western [black widow spider](#) to compare the abundance and habitat selection of the two species.

"The brown widows really burst on to the scene in a very short time, and we found brown widows in many habitats where we expected to find black widows," said corresponding author Richard Vetter (University of California, Riverside). "There may be some competition where brown widows are displacing black widows because there is some habitat overlap. There are also places where only brown widows were able to make homes, but in other habitats the black widows still predominate."

After collecting data at 72 sites, which involved 96.8 hours of collecting, the authors found 20 times as many brown widows than black widows outside homes, especially under outdoor tables and chairs, and in tiny spaces in walls, fences and other objects. Neither spider is found in the living space of houses.

"Homeowners would benefit to know about the hiding places of brown widows, displaying care when placing their hands in nooks and crannies," the authors conclude. However, they should also keep in mind that even if the chances of being bitten do increase, the dangers are lessened because the brown widow bite is less toxic than that of the black widow.

More information: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1603/ME11285>

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