

Jumping spiders are the most diverse group of spiders in the world and comprise nearly 13 per cent of named species. They occur on all major landmasses, except Antarctica, and have even colonised islands far out to sea, as juveniles are able to disperse long-distances by floating through the air on silken threads, a technique called ballooning. If they land on a habitable island, they occasionally survive long enough to establish a viable population.

As their name implies, jumping spiders can leap long distances, often many times their own body length. Indeed, the scientific name of the first genus to be described in the family Salticidae was *Salticus*, which is a Latin word for leaping. They are also unusual for the arrangement of their eyes which comprise four large anterior eyes located at the front of the carapace, and four smaller eyes on the top of the carapace. This characteristic eye arrangement defines the family. Not surprisingly, their four large eyes provide them with excellent vision, enabling them to locate and leap towards prey from remarkable distances. Many jumping spiders have colour vision, a rare trait among spiders, allowing the evolution of colour patterns on the body and/or legs of many different species. Some have evolved brilliant colouring that rivals birds for their complexity and beauty.

Among the most beautiful of all jumping spiders are the peacock spiders of the genus *Maratus*, but only the males are brightly coloured, as the females tend to be dull brown. Indeed, one of the first named species is called *Maratus pavonis*, which comes from the Latin word for peacock. A fitting appellation, indeed.

Maratus is restricted to Australia and now comprises more than 70 named species, with new species found and described each year.

Apart from their bright colouration, the males of most peacock spider species have flaps or fringes of setae on the sides of their abdomens, and long third legs with brushes of setae or white tips. These features are also lacking in the females, and there are few points for guessing their purpose – sex. When courting females, the male uses



Peacock spiders – dancers of the forest

all of his wares to beguile the female. The routine varies between species, but there are some common elements. The abdomen is raised so that it faces the female, amply displaying his gaudy colours. The flaps or setae, if present, are expanded, and the third legs are lifted in the air. Then the fun begins – he dances for his consort, wiggling himself backwards and forwards, moving his abdomen and legs. Each species has its own special dance, but they all put on a special show. For many years, these spiders were thought to glide, using the abdominal flaps to ease their fall when jumping. Indeed, *Maratus volans* was named in the 19th century for this supposed behaviour, which was suggested by the collector H.H.B. Bradley who noted that ‘he had observed them elevating and depressing the flaps, and also actually using them as wings or supporters to sustain the length of their leaps’. The British taxonomist who named the species correctly suspected that the flaps “are sexual”.

Many different species have been described in the genus over the past few years, and there are now more than 30 species recorded from southern Western Australia. Some are widespread, but others are known to be highly restricted, with Sarah’s peacock spider (*Maratus sarahae*), which was named in 2013, known only from

Above The magnificent *Maratus horticorum*.
Inset *Maratus spicatus*.
Photos – Jean and Fred Hort

the peaks of the eastern side of the Stirling Range. Due to its very small range and the possibility that their montane habitat will be badly affected by climate change, Sarah’s peacock spider has been added to Western Australia’s threatened species list.

If you haven’t seen a peacock spider in real life, don’t despair, as they are not uncommon in south-western Australia. Indeed, *Maratus pavonis* is found in suburban gardens in southern Australia where the males can be seen jumping around on sunny days on lawns in spring. And where there’s a male, there is bound to be a female, but they are really hard to spot due to their dull colours.

A search of the internet for peacock spider videos, will also provide some entertaining viewing.

Discover more about Peacock spiders

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