

Big Mama of the Beaverkill by Patricia Adams, October 3, 2011

On October 2, they were all gone. Hundreds of them scattered, off into the world to fend for themselves. Their home remained, still sturdy in spite of the winds and rains of Hurricane Irene. I blew on it lightly, just to make sure. Not a movement. The spiders had left their secure home, a web which was attached to the water fountain.

I had been checking this water fountain for the past three weeks as I took my morning walk, with our dog Lucy, through the Beaverkill Campsite. The web had caught the early sun one morning and when I bent down to look at it, stretched from the fountain 'hood' down to the spigot handle, I was curious because there was nothing caught in this tight oblong web. I looked more closely and saw the big egg sac, lodged against the lip of the fountain. Just outside of the web, a very large brown and black spider waited. It was Big Mama guarding her offspring---hundreds of them.

Big Mama was not deterred in her watch as I moved around and tried to figure out what was going on. I saw a flurry of activity as microscopic spiders crawled out of the sac, and then hurried back in. I kept watch on this sturdy natural phenomena as the weeks went by and Big Mama never moved beyond her guarding station.

Finally the spiders appeared and began to leave the web by crawling down a long 'web line' that the mother spider had dropped for them stretching from the fountain down to the grass below. Each day, more spiders left and others were milling about, trying to get up their nerve to go out into the world. After a couple of weeks, Big Mama disappeared.

In the River Reporter, I saw a short article on Fish Spiders, and the picture closely resembled Big Mama so I looked up information about it. Since this spider had just laid her eggs, I check the section on reproduction and read;

"Female fishing spiders are larger than the males. If a female chooses to eat a male after mating, there is usually little he can do about it. This behaviour may help the female

by providing the nutrition she needs to produce healthy young, while the male gets the benefit of passing his genes on to a well-fed next generation."

Well, certainly , no male was evident, so we could assume the worst.

I also learned that that the little spiders are susceptible to being consumed by dragon flies, which are plentiful along the river at this time of year. Wasps also sting and paralyze mature spiders and lay their eggs in their abdomen. When the baby wasps emerge, they eat the spider for their first sustenance. The spiders, on the other hand, prey on 'water striders'----- those gossamer bugs that skid across the surface of the water.

One morning I saw a spider, already larger than the minuscule creatures just emerging from the sac, scurry *back* up the post towards the web. I watched him/her come up, check things out around the web, explore a bit, and then travel back down to the earth. I wondered if she was a little homesick for her siblings and had come back for a visit, but then she must have realized you can't go home again. I thought of what these little animals had in store - winter coming on, fewer insects already and miles to go before they could rest. I have no idea what they do over the winter, but wished them well as they scurried down to the ground. It's tough out in the natural world. Not only did I wish the spiders well, I hope the hummingbirds who spent the summer buzzing throughout our gardens make it safely to Costa Rica. And bon voyage to the multitude of Monarchs who spent a few days flitting around our asters as they prepared to fly to Mexico.

Something 'tough' happened to the hardwoods on the mountain. There are many trees without leaves and there are no brilliant reds or yellows this year. I'm searching for an explanation for this.

But Nature is also bountiful, and there has never been an apple crop like we have this year. Every tree, old, young, sprayed or never sprayed is laden with perfectly formed, beautifully crisp apples.

It's amazing what happens in our own back yards.