

Avicularia avicularia (Pink-toed Tarantula)

Order: Araneae (Spiders)

Class: Arachnida (Spiders, Scorpions and Mites)

Phylum: Arthropoda (Arthropods)



Fig. 1. Pink-toed tarantula, *Avicularia avicularia*.

[Butterfly Pavilion (2014). Avicularia Guide, downloaded 22 February 2016]

TRAITS. The pink-toed tarantula or pink-toed tree spider is a hairy black to grey spider with characteristic pink tips to the legs (Fig. 1). The toe colour may vary from purple, violet, red, orange and red-pink. The male pink-toed tarantula grows to about 9cm in size while the females are larger and grow to about 13cm (Schultz and Schultz, 2009). The mature males are thinner and have longer legs, and the hair of their abdomen has a metallic black hue (Hoy, 2006). The male also has a pair of hooks on its first pair of legs for grappling with the female during courtship and mating (Costa and Pérez-Miles, 2002).

DISTRIBUTION. *Avicularia avicularia* is a native species to Brazil, French Guiana, Guyana, Suriname, areas of Venezuela, and Trinidad (Fig. 2). The exact distribution across Trinidad and Tobago is not well known.

HABITAT AND ACTIVITY. The pink-toed tarantula lives mainly in trees and bushes and are typically solitary organisms. They live to an average of 4-8 years and mature within 2-3 years. It is a well-known and relatively common species in the wild.

FOOD AND FEEDING. The pink-toed tarantula consumes mostly insect prey and is an aggressive feeder. Some of its prey includes crickets, wax moths, grasshoppers, roaches and small tree frogs (Schultz and Schultz, 2009). They sometimes consume small lizards like *Anolis* but vertebrates usually are not a major contributor to its diet.

BEHAVIOUR. The defence behaviour of the pink-toed tarantula is similar to most tarantulas. When threatened, it raises its first two pairs of legs and produces a hiss which can be heard clearly a few metres away (Stradling, 1976). The pink-toed tarantula also has a defence mechanism against small flies. These flies feed on the remaining prey left in the burrow, and the fly larvae were also found on the feet and legs of the spider. Before the moulting period the spider removes the flies by spinning a web like a mat, equal in circumference to its leg span, and brushes its hairs. Any unwanted material, debris or bugs are removed and drop onto the mat (Hoy, 2006). The tarantula moults by shedding its exoskeleton but the most distinctive feature is that it may replace internal organs. For example the female genitalia and the stomach wall or lining (Tarantula Facts, 2014). This process begins well in advance of the actual shedding process as a new lining or skin will grow below the current one to be shed. The actual shedding of the exoskeleton occurs quickly with the tarantula positioned on its back and legs upward in the air (Schultz and Schultz, 2009). Upon completion of the shedding the new skin appears pale and soft as it may take a few days to form into its typical exoskeleton (Stradling, 1976).

REPRODUCTION. Tarantulas' mating pattern is very unique. Part of the ritual in preparation for the act is the male spins a small web in which he sprays sperm, held in his pedipalps (small leg-like appendages, before the first true legs) (Costa and Pérez-Miles, 2002). On completion of the preparation he then searches for a female's burrow by using the scent of her pheromones. When he finds the burrow he taps his foot to alert her of his presence; if she accepts she comes out of her burrow but if she does not she will ignore him or attack him. In the case of acceptance of the mating call, she comes out of her burrow and the male begins a courtship display (Tarantula Facts, 2014). This display consist of a series of shaking movements; the downward movement of his upper body and the upward thrust of his abdomen and the swaying back and forth of his pedipalps. The act of mating will then occur while he holds her fangs back using the hooks on the first pair of his legs (Costa and Pérez-Miles, 2002). When mating is over he quickly leaves, as many times the females try to eat the males after mating. The female pink-toed tarantula lays about 50-200 eggs wrapped in a silk woven ball for protection (Tarantula Facts, 2014). The female will then guard her clutch of eggs for a period of about 6-8 weeks as this is the typical incubation till they hatch. It is observed that when spiderlings hatch they have blue markings that over time fade into the pink coloration (Pink Toed Tarantula, 2016).

APPLIED ECOLOGY. The pink-toed tarantula is not listed by the International Union for Conservation of Nature as endangered (Tarantula Facts, 2014). It is not a hunted species but well known for being a pet and home bred. This species has a marketable value, of between US\$40-50. This is a major trade industry, there are books and artificial homes referred to as Tarantula Terrarium Kits (Backwater Reptiles, 2000).

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Fig. 2. Distribution map for *Avicularia avicularia*.

[World Maps: Latin America and Caribbean (2014), downloaded 8 March 2016, hand-coloured]

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