

# Meet Wyoming's most charismatic spiders

**S**ome guys have all the right dance moves. That's not limited to the human world, either. Many animals perform elaborate dances as part of their courting rituals. In the bird world, for example, many species put on displays to attract a mate.

In Wyoming, sage-grouse and sharp-tailed grouse are known for their dancing prowess. Less known, though, are the performances by some of the state's smallest creatures—jumping spiders.

These spiders can be found throughout the Cowboy State. With eight legs and eight eyes arranged in a horseshoe pattern, they are easily identified by their two



Jumping spider, most likely *Phidippus apacheanus*, though it is difficult to be certain without a front view of its face. Photo by Scott Schell.



Jumping spider, most likely *Phidippus audax*. Photo by Melissa Bukovsky.

large front eyes. Those big eyes aren't just for looks. Jumping spiders have excellent eyesight and can even see colors.

They also have hairy leg-like structures, called pedipalps, at the front of the head, which gives them a fuzzy appearance. Their big eyes and hairy pedipalps give them a distinct look many people find less intimidating than other spiders; some even describe these arachnids as cute.

"Jumping spiders don't seem as threatening to a lot of people," says Scott Schell, University of Wyoming Extension entomology specialist. "They often follow our movements, and they don't make webs that people



The Apache jumping spider (*Phidippus apacheanus*) is one of the most colorful jumping spiders found in Wyoming. Photo by Tracie Binkerd.

can run into. Also, most of them are quite small, so they're less physically threatening than some other spiders. But I think a lot of what makes people like them is those two big eyes. They look intelligent."

The males are often brightly colored with highly visible tufts of hair—the better for females to see them during their courting display.

### **The right dance moves**

"Because they have such good visual acuity, when they're looking for mates they're using largely visual cues," says Paula Cushing, Ph.D., senior curator of invertebrate zoology at the Denver Museum of Nature and Science. "The males use visual cues to find the females. So

when they find something that looks like it could be a potential mate, they will approach that female and they will dance."

Their dances can be elaborate, with the males moving their abdomen at specific angles, waving their long front legs in the air, showing off hair tufts on their heads and legs, waving their fuzzy pedipalps, and showing off their patterns or colors while moving back and forth. Every species of jumping spider has unique courtship behavior, which can assist in differentiating similar species.

Even with their exceptional eyesight, the males sometimes get it wrong. Eager males have been spotted dancing for objects

they confuse for females, including things like phone lenses, plants, decorations, and even possible food sources.

"I've had adult male jumping spiders try to court a house fly because it's generally the right shape and color," Cushing notes.

### **Hunters and jumpers**

Rather than building webs to capture prey, these spiders use their excellent vision to hunt, seeking prey during the daylight hours. At night, they retire to silken retreats built from their own spider silk, which offer a comfortable resting place and a safe spot for females to lay eggs.

As their name suggests, jumping

spiders are skilled jumpers; some can jump up to 30 times their body length. As hunters, they can quickly jump on prey and even cross gaps in vegetation or other surfaces. Rather than relying on muscles to get the job done, jumping spiders change the blood flow in their body—essentially using hydraulics to power their hind legs for the jump.

### Not a threat

While the thought of a spider capable of jumping great lengths can be unnerving, jumping spiders aren't a threat to humans. Some of the larger species are big enough to break the skin of a human, but they're inclined to escape from a large threat instead of biting it. If a bite does occur, the venom is not medically significant to humans and feels like an ant bite or bee sting.

"All spiders are more likely to run away and to avoid encountering a giant like a human than they are to bite," says Cushing. "Bites occur when the spider is trapped. Bites occur if you don't realize a spider is

hiding under a rock or log; you place your hand there to move the object, and you're trapping the spider against your hand. Even in situations like that where the spider is biting to protect itself—biting because it's being seriously provoked—even in those instances it's often a dry bite. The venom is metabolically expensive for the spider to produce, so it's not going to waste its venom on something it can't eat."

People are most likely to encounter jumping spiders during the day when the arachnids are actively hunting for insects. They're frequently spotted in sunny spots along buildings, on structures, in leafy vegetation, or along tree trunks. As hunters, they are extremely beneficial in controlling insect populations.

"I see them wholly as beneficial," Schell comments. "They play a role in the environment. They are native species that control other arthropods and maintain the balance of nature."

### Fun to watch

These spiders are charismatic—not something you'd expect to hear about an eight-legged creature. For those interested in spider behavior, they are exceptionally fun to observe. "It's really fun to watch them hunt," says Cushing. "It's really fun to watch them court with each other, or try to court—that dance is crazy. If you're catching one around your home, then once you've watched it you can just let it outside again. But they're a fun animal to watch in captivity."

If you do see a jumping spider, there's a decent chance it's paying attention to you, too. They are naturally curious and often watch people. If you're so inclined, offer a hand to a jumping spider. Often it will jump up and explore.

For assistance in identifying or managing spiders, contact UW Extension entomologist Scott Schell at [sschell@uwyo.edu](mailto:sschell@uwyo.edu) or (307) 766-2508.

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## Jumping spiders in Wyoming

Wyoming is home to about 45 species of jumping spiders ranging in color and size. Bold jumping spiders are some of the most commonly seen jumpers in the state, and they are also some of the state's largest. They can grow to nearly ¾ of an inch long, although most in Wyoming are much smaller. Bolds are typically black with white, yellow, or orange spot patterns on their abdomen. They have iridescent green mouthparts, which are called chelicerae.

Another common species is the smaller zebra jumper, which maxes out at ¼ inch in length. These small jumpers are black and white striped with dark chelicerae.

Some of the state's most colorful species include Apache jumping spiders, with bright red males and orange females. Both males and females have iridescent green chelicerae.