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August 30, 2017

Audubon Butterfly Garden and Insectarium Welcomes World's Largest Wasps

(New Orleans, La.) - Audubon Butterfly Garden and Insectarium is currently home to a small collection of tarantula hawks, a beautiful insect that offers a fascinating study in contradictions.

For example, the tarantula hawk technically is a wasp. It's the largest member of the spider wasp family Pompilidae, a family of thousands of species that preys only on spiders.

While the name comes, in part, from their primary prey - the much bigger tarantula - the insect does not attack from the air like a "hawk." Instead, it walks up to a tarantula's resting place, setting the stage for a deadly duel.

"An adult female tarantula hawk usually lures a spider out of its burrow and engages in a battle typically won by the wasp," said Zack Lemann, Audubon Butterfly Garden and Insectarium's Curator of Animal Collections. "Its sting paralyzes the spider, which is dragged across the ground and then placed in a chamber under the soil that the wasp herself digs and then covers."

As an adult, a tarantula hawk drinks flower nectar. It's their larvae that devour tarantulas during a ritual that reads like a passage from a Stephen King novel.

"A single egg is laid on the paralyzed spider, and over the course of about a month, the larva consumes the tarantula entirely," said Lemann.

The sting of tarantula hawks is said to be among the most painful of all insects, but because of their solitary nature, human interactions are exceptionally rare.

Under the bright lights of the Insectarium's Metamorphosis Lab, the gorgeous iridescent blue sheen and bright orange wings of the tarantula hawks shows up wonderfully. "They are big and pretty," Lemann said.

The wasps, some of which arrived in June from Arizona, can be observed by visitors at Audubon Butterfly Garden and Insectarium through October.

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