mystery science

Grades K-5
Mini-Lesson: “What is the biggest spider in the world?”

VIDEO TRANSCRIPT

Hi, it's Doug! I want to talk about spiders—and not fake ones like this decoration either—real spiders. Now, I know some people consider spiders incredibly creepy. But other people even keep them as pets. I'm one of them. Are you ready to see this? This is my pet tarantula. Her name is Goldie. She's not the first tarantula I've ever had, but she's the first one I've had that's incredibly calm. She doesn't mind if I hold her, as long as I hold her carefully. I have no idea if you find this amazing or just plain creepy, but I hope you'll keep watching. We've got a question today from someone named Aliyah. Let's give her a call now.

[Video Call]
- Hi, Doug!
- Hi, Aliyah!
- I have a question for you. What is the biggest spider in the world?
- That's a great question.

Before I say anything more, take a moment to talk to someone near you. How do you feel about spiders, and what's the biggest spider you've ever seen?

Seeing the biggest spider in the world might be a little scary. The fear of spiders, it's called arachnophobia—and it's understandable. Many spiders don't exactly look cuddly. Here's the thing, though—most spiders almost never harm people. In North America, where I live, lots of

people get kind of freaked out by spiders like this—the black widow. Or this one too—the brown recluse. Both of these spiders are venomous, but they almost never bite people. They save their venom for their prey—the tiny insects that they eat. But other spiders, you could even say there's something kind of cute about them. Look at this one. Or my personal favorite, check out this one. It's called the peacock spider, and it does a little dance. But whether you find them cute or not, spiders are definitely interesting. Look at all those eyes and all those legs! And just the sheer variety of spiders in the world—there are so many different kinds of spiders, different species. Some of them have incredible colors, like this tarantula called the greenbottle blue. It's a nighttime hunter of South America. Or this one from Hawaii. Look at the pattern on its bottom end. Would it surprise you if I told you that this spider is called the happy-face spider? And it's not just spiders' looks that can be fascinating. So many of them have incredible behaviors too, like this spider. There, did you see that? It hides right among its prey, and—watch again. This spider is called a trapdoor spider. Or check out this one called a fishing spider which actually has the ability to move on the surface of the water. Here's another interesting behavior. It's called a crab spider, and it surprise-attacks its prey. But to Aliyah's question, of all these different species, which is the biggest spider in the world? This is actually a surprisingly difficult question to answer. You see, in order to know exactly what the biggest spider is, scientists have to go out and search for all the different species of spiders on Earth. For a long time, the biggest spider known is one that's as big as a dinner plate. Are you ready to see this thing? It's this. It's called the Goliath birdeater, and it lives in the rainforests of South America. Despite its name, it doesn't usually eat birds, but it's big enough that it could if it wanted to. Even though it may seem scary, these spiders only bite people if they're threatened, and even then, the bite is no worse than what a bee sting would feel like to most people. However, in 2001, the record for the biggest spider in the world was challenged. Scientists working in a cave in Southeast Asia

discovered a type of spider that no one had noticed before. They called it the giant huntsman, and while it's not heavier than the Goliath birdeater, it does have longer legs. Here's a video of one of the huntsman's smaller cousins. Even this one has long legs.

So, in summary, figuring out what's the biggest spider in the world really depends on what you mean by biggest. If you go by leg length, the giant huntsman wins. If you go by overall size and weight, the Goliath birdeater still holds the record. Could there be an even bigger spider somewhere out there in the world? The fact that scientists are discovering new species each year means it's still possible.

That's all for this week's question. Thanks, Aliyah, for asking it.