



CONCISE CARE SHEETS

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**B I R D - E A T E R S
A N D C H I C K E N S P I D E R S**

INTRO

The name "bird-eater" has been applied to tarantulas around the world. In fact, it is simply a synonym for tarantula at this point and is often used equally for New World and Old World species. Its origin is an early 18th Century engraving by illustrator-naturalist Madame Sibylla Merian that depicted a Suriname spider (presumably an *Avicularia* "pink-toed" tarantula) eating a small bird. However, "bird-eater" is most memorably applied to the largest of all spiders, the three tarantula species of the genus *Theraphosa* including the Goliath Bird-eater, *Theraphosa blondi*.

"Chicken Spider" is a name that has been often applied to a different genus of huge South American tarantulas. *Pamphobeteus* species are very popular in the tarantula hobby. There are more varieties being kept and bred than science has identified and many have geographic names like *Pamphobeteus* sp. 'Machalla'.

In this care sheet we will lump together many genera of large South American rainforest species that live on the ground, either constructing burrows in the forest floor or more opportunistically making retreats beneath ground cover or inhabiting rodent or other animal burrows. For the purposes of this care sheet we will include *Lasiodora*, *Megaphobema*, *Pamphobeteus*, *Theraphosa*, *Xenesthis*, but other South American tarantulas such as *Acanthoscurria* and *Nhandu* require very similar care.

CAPTIVE CARE

The common requirement of this general group of large South American tarantulas is a spacious enclosure that replicates the environment found in terrestrial subtropical and tropical habitats. For smaller specimens naturalistic terrariums designed for pet reptiles may suffice. However, large specimens will often require the use of a huge storage container filled at least half way with moistened soil. Most front-opening reptile enclosures are not designed for the deep substrate essential for proper husbandry of "bird-eaters" and "chicken spiders". A hollow log set at an angle deep into the substrate will provide an excellent starter burrow, and the spider will usually excavate beneath it to create a tunnel and chamber that further extends the initial retreat.

These tropical spiders require elevated humidity and some like *Theraphosa* will quickly do poorly if moisture is not maintained. This means that ventilation and moisture is a balancing act; maintaining one makes it difficult to maintain the other. Remember that adding moisture is always easier than removing excess moisture, and is much easier than correcting the problems like mold, mites, pest flies, and bacteria that stagnant air and overly damp conditions create. Err on the side of dryness and add moisture as often as needed. Creating a gradient where you only 're-hydrate' one end of the substrate while leaving the other end of the enclosure drier is a good practice. Water poured into the lower depths of substrate by using a tube or funnel inserted deep in one corner of the enclosure is a great technique. It will leave the upper layers of substrate drier and allow natural evaporation from the wetter lower layers to create essential humidity. How often you need to add water is dependent on how much humidity is in the air in the room where the tarantula is housed.

FEEDING

Crickets and roaches are excellent food items for tarantulas because they are convenient and easily obtained. Large specimens of the species covered by this care sheet will require prey much larger than the largest cricket so roaches like *Blaptica dubia* become very important food sources. Dubia roaches are easy to raise and breed and are a self-sustaining food supply. The biggest problem with dubia roaches is that they like to burrow, hence their common name Guyana Burrowing Roach. It may be best to drop right in front of a hungry tarantula or even attempt to offer using long rubber-tipped forceps. Some keepers prefer *Blaberus* species roaches like the discoid roach as they don't quickly disappear into the substrate.

We recommend avoiding feeding vertebrates to tarantulas. Although these large "bird-eaters" and "chicken spiders" are certainly capable of eating rodents or lizards, these prey items usually take a great deal of time to 'digest' and the food bolus becomes an attractant to pests like phorid

QUICK TIPS

- » 75-80°F with a slight drop in temperature at night OK
- » Requires 70-90% humidity, but also good ventilation.
- » Roaches make an excellent large prey item.
- » Avoid contact with urticating hairs!

flies even while still being eaten, and the discarded remains certainly attract pests, mold and bacteria.

WATERING

Tarantulas obtain their water needs from their prey and would seldom drink in the wild. However, tarantula keepers like to provide water dishes for two reasons: as an emergency water source should drinking become necessary and as a source of humidity in the cage. We

recommend always providing a shallow water dish full of clean water. Do not use sponges or cricket gel as an alternative water source. They foul and become havens for bacteria and pests. Tarantulas are quite capable of drinking from a sturdy, shallow dish and a few small rocks or a sprig of plastic plant placed in the water dish will help to prevent crickets or other prey items from drowning.

URTICATING HAIRS

It should be noted that the tarantulas in this group are by far the most notorious for flicking their urticating hairs, and these particular spiders have evolved the most powerful irritating barbs in the spider world. This defense system is quite effective against their predators, but also is quite capable of causing great irritation in humans. Particularly troublesome are the Type V urticating hairs of the genus *Theraphosa*, which become airborne and can cause distress some time after they have been brushed off the tarantula's abdomen. Use caution when feeding or servicing the enclosure of all these spiders. Try to disturb the spider as little as possible and keep eyes, skin and mucuous membranes as far away as possible. Some keepers even don safety goggles or face shield, surgical masks and nitrile gloves, but the best practice is just minimizing contact and disturbance and washing your exposed skin thoroughly after cage maintenance. For those with large assorted collections it is a good practice to take care of other species first, saving the New World species that 'flick hairs' for last and then showering and changing clothes if necessary.

MORE INFORMATION

We recommend our **Basic Tarantula Care** guide for detailed instructions applicable to general tarantula husbandry including suggestions for housing, substrate and environmental control. Additionally, our **Raising Young Tarantulas** special care guide provides information on raising "spiderling" tarantulas.

XENESTHIS IMMANIS

