



Why Harvestmen?

by Peter Nicholson



Why, you might ask, are Harvestmen of interest to me? Most people are familiar with the name and the general idea that they have a small rounded body carried on eight long legs, are generally found in late summer (harvest time) and are similar to spiders. Well, I wish to convince you that this is not the case!

Firstly people confuse these interesting and appealing species with spiders, often called Daddy longlegs spider (Family Pholcidae) which are becoming increasingly common in homes, where they spin a messy, tangled web. Spiders are closely related to harvestmen in that they have eight legs, but they are in fact as different as chalk and cheese, as the saying goes; we will expand on this later. Harvestmen are also confused with a certain insect, also called Daddy longlegs. These are the Craneflies (Family Tipulidae) which of course have wings; harvestmen do not. I should at this point also add that, unlike spiders, harvestmen do not make or use silk.

Having got this confusion out of the way we can get down to how to separate harvestmen from spiders; here you will have to look closely at a picture or a specimen. Firstly, the **harvestmen**'s body parts are all fused or joined together into one, unlike **insects**, which have three distinct parts (head, thorax, and abdomen) or **spiders**, with two body parts (head + thorax combined, and abdomen).



Harvestman: A female *Leiobunum rotundum*



Spider: *Tegenaria* species (a male house spider)





The next fascinating thing to notice about harvestmen is that their bodies and legs are often armoured with an array of spines and **tubercles** (thick spines), making them look quite fierce. They also have only two eyes, unlike spiders which have up to eight. These eyes are very noticeable as they are raised above the body on a turret-like structure (the **Ocularium**), which is often crowned with spines and tubercles. To the front of the Ocularium can be seen a number of spines or tubercles. To the front there are often three noticeable tubercles in a row (the **Trident**) and these can be a help in identification.



A female *Mitopus morio* harvestman

Many species also have colour patterns on their backs, some with a dark hour-glass shape which is called a saddle. To the front edge of the body are two pairs of leg-like structures. The lighter pair are called **pedipalps**, which are used to hold on to and control food items. The

stout pair at the centre are called **chelicerae** - strong, scissor-like jaws used for cutting, tearing and crushing. Both of these appendages are used in feeding and often in grooming.



Opilio canestrinii (a female)

Keeping harvestmen to study them

Now, I use the term 'appealing' to describe these creatures as, unlike spiders, they very seldom eat each other when several are put together. To study them, all you need is an aquarium with a close-fitting lid, a supply of clean drinking water, a base of sand, a tray of moist soil where they can lay eggs, and a few stones for shade and shelter. Most harvestmen have been shown to have a wide-ranging diet, from small, live, soft-bodied invertebrates to scavenging dead creatures such as centipedes, ants, beetles, and woodlice. It is thought that





most food is caught alive, although they also show interest in fungi and soft fruits. In captivity, fresh scraps of meat, fat and bread will be sufficient. Keeping harvestmen indoors provides an opportunity for observation and recording what they eat and how they behave.

It will be noticed that harvestmen love to keep clean and spend a noticeable amount of time grooming, particularly their legs, which are pulled sideways through their jaws. Legs provide their owner with much of their information about the world around them. This is especially true of the second pair of legs, which are always the longest. They can be seen continually sweeping the area around them with these legs, using them in a similar way to the antennae of insects. It is said that if a harvestman loses these legs, it becomes severely disabled and confused. Another feature of harvestmen legs is the ease with which they are lost. This is a survival feature which allows an individual to escape from dangerous situations where, if it didn't shed a leg, it may be eaten. This becomes more of a problem if one of the second pair of legs is lost.





Finally, there is one other feature of interest: a pair of glands opening above and close to where the first leg is attached to the body. From these openings are secreted an unpleasant fluid used as a defence when the harvestman is threatened. The odour can often be detected if a number of specimens are put together in a clean container, although in British species this is not very strong.

There are 26 species known in the UK, of which 4 are recent arrivals. Of these, the top five most likely to be seen are *Mitopus morio*, *Nemastoma bimaculatum*, *Paroligolophus agrestis*, *Platybunus triangularis* and *Leiobunum rotundum*. This list is based on the number of records received, and may not apply where you live.

For more information please visit our Spider and Harvestmen Recording website where there are many features and photographs that might be of interest to you. There is also the British Arachnological Society website.

The Field Studies Council has also produced a fold out chart on British Harvestmen which has photographs of the main species, with ID notes and guidance. This is well worth purchasing, and is available at a modest price.

Spider and Harvestmen Recording Website:
<http://srs.britishspiders.org.uk>

British Arachnological Society Website:
<http://wiki.britishspiders.org.uk>

FSC Publications: <http://www.field-studies-council.org/publications/pubs/harvestmen.aspx>

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