

A Wolf by any other name

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Wolf Spiders are agile hunters. Rather than catching prey in a silken net they use their speed and keen eyesight to capture a range of ground-dwelling insects and other spiders. Some live in burrows, with or without a lid, while others are nomadic.

Garden Wolf Spiders are the ones most likely to be found round Hamilton. The female's appearance is a mottled grey and brown, and she often has a radiating pattern on the cephalothorax (the front portion of the body). The overall body length is about 25 mm.

She may be seen carrying her egg sac around with her or, after the eggs hatch, carrying a mass of tiny spiderlings on her abdomen (the rear part of the body). Unusual in the spider world, she will look after them until they are able to do so themselves. If Wolf Spiders are disturbed they will run rapidly for some distance before standing perfectly still. Their colouration makes them very difficult to see.

Spider experts have named the group that wolf spiders belong to as *Lycosa*. This comes from a Greek word "lykos", meaning 'wolf'. Biologists have borrowed this Greek word to name a number of plants and animals. Some clubmosses, a group of fern-like plants with some characteristics of mosses, are called *Lycopodium*. The Greek for foot is "podos"; so this means 'little wolf feet', referring to the claw-like leaves. Some say that the roots of the plant look like a wolf's foot.

Many puffball fungi are in the group known as *Lycoperdon*. They are commonly seen in lawns, paddocks and along bush tracks. They are about 20mm in diameter, spherical in shape with a papery skin enclosing a mass of dust-like spores. When touched a cloud of spores is ejected from a small hole at the top of the ball. Raindrops or passing animals can trigger this action. What does *Lycoperdon* mean? Well, "perdon" comes from the Greek word for flatulence. Quite literally, they are wolf farts. I have read that some European societies believed that the presence of puffballs indicated that a wolf had passed that way.



If you look for the scientific name for the Timber or Grey Wolf of Europe and North America expecting to see something like "lycos", you will be disappointed. This magnificent carnivore is labelled *Canis lupus*. "Lupus" happens to be Latin for wolf. Scientific naming isn't all Greek!

Photo

The Wolf Spider – an agile hunter.