

Rapid Lesson Sharing

Event Type: Black Widow Spiders

Date: August 30, 2015

Location: Kettle Complex,
Washington State



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by Black Widow Spiders.*

NARRATIVE

When the Incident Management Team on the Kettle Complex in northeast Washington moved base camp, they encountered an unexpected hazard.

The new site was prepared using a dozer to level the ground. Bark chips were brought in to calm the dust and prevent mud holes if it rained.

They soon discovered that this new location was already occupied—by a resident population of black widow spiders. These spiders were living underground in old rodent burrows. When the ground was disturbed, they came up to the surface.

Several Suspected Bite Reports, Only One Black Widow Bite Confirmed

Over the next several days, these black widow spiders were found in yurts—especially near the roof seams—and were also hiding near and behind large objects like monitors or stacked tables.

Every day, people were going to the Medical Unit with bites that they suspected were from black widows.

The only confirmed black widow bite, however, occurred when the person put on a jacket. Even though this person did not have an adverse reaction, they were transported to the local medical clinic as a precaution. The wound was cleaned and the person returned to work.

Mitigations

The IMT brought in an exterminator to spray the camp. If individuals didn't want the area around their personal tents to be sprayed, they could place a sign by their tent (see photo on next page).

Rain seemed to tamp down black widow spider sightings.

The spider hazard was highlighted at each briefing, along with pointers on how to avoid them, and what to do if bitten.



Black widow spiders at Kettle ICP.

LESSONS – REMINDERS

- ✓ Black widow spiders can live below the surface of the ground. This was a surprise to almost everyone interviewed. Because these spiders like dark places, abandoned rodent holes are a preferred habitat.
- ✓ When the ground is disturbed (by dozers or pounding in tent stakes, etc.) these spiders can come up out of the ground.
- ✓ What individuals can do:
 - Zip-up your tent when you enter and exit.
 - Don't leave boots, clothes, or gear outside your tent.
 - Look over your clothing when you put it on (like when your jacket has been lying somewhere, inspect it before putting it on).
 - Be heads-up when you are moving things in in yurts (such as from behind monitors or tables that have been sitting for a while).
- ✓ Locals in the area can help with the initial camp setup and with information on the area's known hazards and resources.
- ✓ The Medical Unit fully researched the protocol and what steps needed to be taken if someone is bitten by a black widow spider.
- ✓ Even with the frequent spraying by the exterminator, black widow spiders still turned up in the yurts. Therefore, education helped prevent more bites.



This RLS Submitted by:

Damen Therkildsen and Brad Mayhew, with support from the Pacific Northwest Wildfire Coordinating Group.



Pacific Northwest Wildfire
Coordinating Group

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