

Teeny jumping spider found in woman's ear after days of torturous racket

Enlarge / The side view of the spider (on the left) in the ear canal with the exoskeleton in the background.

reader comments

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While brain worms have made many horrifying headlines this year, the good folks at the New England Journal of Medicine offer some fresh nightmare fuel ahead of Halloween: an ear spider. And there's a video.

In a short clinical report published in this week's issue, doctors in Tainan City, Taiwan, detail the case of a 64-year-old woman who sought care at an otolaryngology (ENT) clinic. She came in complaining of having an incessant ruckus in her left ear for the previous four days. On the first day of symptoms, the woman said she was awoken by a feeling of a wee creature crawling in her ear canal. That feeling was then followed by days of clicking, beating, and rustling noises.

[embedded content]

It didn't take long to find the problem; in a physical exam, the doctors easily spotted the itty-bitty arachnid moving about its cozy new shelter. And it wasn't exactly alone. During its four-day stay, it apparently molted, leaving an exuvia (its shed exoskeleton) in the canal as well.

Video of the creepy crawler shows it darting around the canal,

just in front of the eardrum. When it spots the medical probe nearing, the spider comes in for a closer look, facing the camera directly for a perfect view of its eyes.

The medical report doesn't identify the type of spider it is, and it's usually very difficult to identify spiders based on pictures. But Ars reached out to two spider experts who both said the spider is, without a doubt, in the family of jumping spiders (*Salticidae*). The giveaway is "the family-specific arrangement and size ratio of the eyes," Martin Nyffeler, an emeritus senior lecturer in zoology at the University of Basel, told Ars over email. Specifically, this family of spiders has large median front eyes, which can be seen in the ear spider when it looks directly into the camera.

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Enlarge / The spider looking directly at the camera. Jumping spiders have excellent vision, Nyfeeler noted. But, unfortunately for the woman's hearing, they're also "very mobile."

The images are not good enough to identify it further to a genus or species level, Nyffeler said. (There are over 6,000 species of *Salticidae* in the world.) But he speculated, based on its small size and the fact that it shed its skin, it may be a juvenile spider.

Jerry Rovner, an emeritus biology professor at Ohio University, agreed that it appears to be a tiny juvenile. He noted in an email to Ars that the spider's eyes are large relative to its cephalothorax (fused head and thorax)—i.e., it has big baby eyes. This makes it even more difficult to identify further, Rovner said. Most spiders are identified based on adult characteristics.

Rovner explained that the likely reason it nestled into the woman's ear was for safe shelter. "Many hunting spiders (i.e., those that do not live in prey-capture webs) seek a sheltered location for the purpose of molting, as they cannot defend themselves from predators during that process."

He also made an appeal on the spider's behalf, noting, "Like 99.95 percent of the world's >50,000 species of spiders, jumping spiders are not dangerous." Nyffeler agreed, noting that jumping spiders are not toxic to humans.

The doctors treating the woman reported no damage to her eardrum. They sucked the spider and its exuvia out, and the woman's symptoms "immediately abated," they reported

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