



*Missulena pruinosa* male.  
Photo: Gavin Dally

## NORTHERN MOUSE SPIDER (*Missulena pruinosa*)

In the heat and humidity of the Top End's build up season (Oct-Nov) a robust black spider can often be seen in gardens and buildings. This is the male Northern Mouse Spider - a wandering Romeo in search of a mate. Increasing moisture levels in the environment at this time of year means he can leave his burrow without dehydrating, enabling him to look for a mate. To attract the male, the female lines her burrow with silk laced with a pheromone (a special chemical scent). The females are rarely seen, spending most of their time in burrows, which are extremely well camouflaged and unlikely to be noticed.

### Identification

The Northern Mouse Spider is shiny black to dark brown in colour. While the female is completely dark, the male has a conspicuous light grey to bluish-white patch on his back. The body length of the male is about 18 mm, while the female is around 30 mm. Both sexes have a wide head with large fangs, and eyes spread across the front. The legs are comparatively short and thick.

The Northern Mouse Spider belongs to the Trap-door family of spiders. Although often confused with the Sydney Funnel-web spider, the Northern Mouse Spider is smaller. Funnel-web Spiders are adapted to live in moist, cool conditions and have not been found in the Northern Territory.

### Distribution

The genus *Missulena* is widespread across Australia and the South Pacific region, with at least 3 species known to occur in the Northern Territory. The Northern Mouse Spider, *Missulena pruinosa*, is the species found in the Darwin area.



*Missulena pruinosa* female.  
Photo: Gavin Dally

### Hazards to humans

During the build up season, male Northern Mouse Spiders mainly move around during the night. During the day, they seek shelter underneath objects on or near the ground (they are not great climbers) to avoid predators and drying out in the daytime heat. Unfortunately, people get bitten when they use towels or put on clothes that have been lying on the ground sheltering a spider. For this reason, it is always a good idea to hang clothing and towels up off the ground and to check shoes before putting them on.

If it is disturbed, a Northern Mouse Spider will defensively rear up into a striking position. They do have large fangs capable of inflicting a painful wound, but rarely inject significant amounts of venom. If bitten, a pressure immobilisation bandage should be applied and medical advice sought, especially for children, the elderly and those with existing medical conditions. A cold pack may be useful in alleviating any pain associated with the bite. Significant symptoms are rare, with localised pain, nausea and headaches being most commonly reported.

The males of a related species, the Eastern Mouse Spider (*Missulena bradleyi*) may cause a more serious bite and can require treatment with antivenom. This species does not occur in the Northern Territory.

### Habits

The Trap-door family of spiders construct a vertical tunnel or burrow in the ground, and line it with silk. The genus *Missulena* is unique amongst Trap-door spiders, in that the burrows usually have two doors instead of one. The doors are hinged at their sides with silk, at about 120 degrees to each other, forming the 'trap-door'. The doors may be thin and flap-like or heavy and plug-like. Leading from the main burrow is a smaller horizontal side chamber where the female lays her eggs.