

Katipo

(*Latrodectus* spp.)

Introduction:

New Zealand is home to two species of katipo. *Latrodectus katipo* is found on many North Island sandy beaches in base of the grasses and sedges growing at the back of the beach. The species is also found in the South Island but is limited to only part way down the West Coast and as far as Dunedin on the East Coast. It is distinguished by a red stripe on the back of the abdomen. The second species (*L. atritus*) occurs on beaches in Taranaki, Hawkes Bay and the Bay of Plenty and has an entirely black abdomen. Katipo is the Maori name for these spiders and means 'night-stinger'. While it is New Zealand's most poisonous spider it is likely that most New Zealanders will never see one.



Vital Statistics:

Katipos are small spiders with a maximum body length of 6mm and are found on sandy beaches above the high tide mark. They create webs near the ground at the base of grasses, under driftwood, tin cans or other beach debris to catch prey such as beetles. As insects pass through an area where the spider has created a web they may be caught in the ground level traps. Interestingly only the female katipo has the ability to penetrate human skin, the male is too small. The bite will cause a variety of symptoms as the venom attacks the nervous system but recovery is within days. Anti-venom is available.

What makes it unique?

Katipos are the only venomous spiders endemic to New Zealand. They belong to the same genus (*Lactrodectus*) as the black widow (of which there are six species in North America) and the Australian redback (*L. hasselti*).

Conservation:

As the habitats favoured by katipo slowly disappear or are damaged through development numbers decrease without being noticed. Suggested means of protecting katipos are as simple as saving sand dunes, leaving them as undisturbed as possible and promoting the protection and growth of vegetation which create shelter for the spiders. Other threats come from introduced spider species that attempt to establish themselves in the same habitat thereby displacing the native species. Katipos lose their ecological niche to foreign spiders such as the Australian red-back, which is more aggressive and has a wider habitat range. Likewise the South African immigrant false katipo (*Steatoda capensis*) is now common around much of the New Zealand coast. Control of the foreign invaders has not been suggested as a means of protecting katipos, as this would probably require biological control of some sort.