

# "A Spider's Strand"

by Michael Finley  
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What are those single strands of spiderweb you walk into in the woods? You just barely feel them brush your lip or on your nose. And you still feel them even after you brush them away.

I know it's spider silk. It's the same material a web is made of, only it is a single strand stretched across the path, horizontally, at about chest level.

Whenever I walk into one of these strands, I wonder two things. First, I wonder what the web's point is. If it's to catch some sort of living animal, large or small, wouldn't a conventional web be better than a single sticky strand? What kind of creature do you trap on a single strand? Maybe it's like those old westerns, where the director strung piano wire across a field to trip horses. The SPCA made them stop doing that.

Second, how the heck does a spider string a strand of web across a path, four feet high on both ends? I can only imagine it in cartoon form:

One cartoon has the spider plastering one end of the line on Trunk A, then hitching down the tree, hiking across the path on foot, climbing up Trunk B and then pulling all the slack out of the line until the line is taut, and plucking it -- *toing!*

The other has the spider on Trunk A very intensely crouching, crouching, crouching, then leaping like a uncoiled spring -- *sproing!* -- across the path, landing just slightly lower on Trunk B, panting like a Marathon winner.

Having these questions about webs, I looked for an answer in the most logical place -- the World Wide Web. I looked up spiderwebs on various search engines. I asked Google, my search engine of choice, a simple plain-language question: "What's with those spiderwebs you walk into in the forest?"

Google, you don't have a clue.

This bugged me mightily, because I walk a lot, and I walk through scores of these webs every day. I need to know if it's something I should worry about, or if it's just one of those things.

This past weekend I got my chance. I was at an open house at a state park interpretive center. I asked a woman serving coffee and cookies if there was a naturalist in the building. I was going to find answers the old fashioned way -- by asking other human beings point blank.

"I'm a naturalist," she said. She didn't look like a naturalist, but she seemed to think she was one. So I asked her.

"Oh, those are spiderwebs," she said.

"What kind of spider?" I asked.

She frowned. "Tree spiders?"

I was going to ask her why these "tree spiders" made the webs, but I thought better of it. I wandered around the center for a few minutes, then ducked into the men's room.

I stepped up to the urinal, and there was an older man next to me. I noticed little bugs flying around the porcelain.

"Wow," I said -- "urinal gnats!"

The old man peered over to see. "That's OK," I said. "You don't need to look."

"I couldn't help overhearing you out there," the old man said, staring forward now. "Those are little spiders, and they use their web strands to swing from tree to tree. They let out a little line, catch a breeze, and there they go."

"Like Tarzan," I said.

He nodded. "If Tarzan could sprout vines on demand out of his bellybutton."

"So it's transportation," I said, "not entrapment." He nodded again.

"That's good, because I was wondering how many of those strands I would have to walk through before I was all trussed up and ready to serve."

"Quite a few, I'd say," the old man snickered. "Quite a few."

"So what kind of spiders would you say these are?"

"Tree spiders," the old man said, squinting.

So they were in it together. I wondered, How deep did the conspiracy run? And what exactly were they covering up?

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To visit Mike, go to <http://www.mfinley.com>, or write him at [mfinley@mfinley.com](mailto:mfinley@mfinley.com)