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11 tarantula species are considered for protected status in U.S.

By Julie Cart

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Poecilotheria metallica, a species of spider native to India, is among 11 tarantulas being considered for Endangered Species Act protection. (Rick C. West)

Although they appear to be perfectly capable of taking care of themselves, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service is considering extending Endangered Species Act protection to 11 tarantula species native to India and Sri Lanka.

Sometimes known as parachute spiders, the colorful and fierce-looking arachnids are threatened by the international pet trade, where vividly hued spiders can fetch a few hundred dollars apiece. They are imperiled by shrinking habitats and fragmented ranges.

Should the tarantulas gain protected status here, U.S. officials could more easily prohibit their importation and sale.

Many of the 11 species under review are already considered endangered or threatened by the International Union for the Conservation of Nature.

The review was prompted by a listing petition from the conservation group WildEarth Guardians. The federal agency will conduct a 12-month status review of the species to determine whether listing is warranted.

All the tarantulas are in the genus *Poecilotheria* and are tree-dwelling, preferring wooded areas in tropical and subtropical forests. Tarantulas are especially successful hunters. They do not use webs to trap prey, but attack from hiding places in trees and inject an immobilizing venom.

The Indian species are:

- *Poecilotheria formosa*, found in two areas of the southern Eastern Ghats in southern India.
- *Poecilotheria hanumavilasumica*, in the Ramanthapuram district of southern India. The IUCN considers this species critically endangered.
- *Poecilotheria metallica*. Also considered critically endangered these metallic-blue spiders are highly sought after in the global pet trade.
- *Poecilotheria miranda*, found in a few locations in the Chota Nagpur region of northeast India.
- *Poecilotheria rufilata*, in the southern Western Ghats in southern India.
- *Poecilotheria striata*. This species is found in the Western Ghats just north and south of the Palghat gap in southern India.

The Sri Lankan species are:

- *Poecilotheria fasciata*. Scientists found only three members of this species during a recent survey.
- *Poecilotheria ornate*. Scientists found just six of this species; it is in the category of near threatened.
- *Poecilotheria pedersenii*. Only six of this species were found in the Hambantota District.
- *Poecilotheria smithi*, a species believed to inhabit south-central Sri Lanka. Considered vulnerable.
- *Poecilotheria subfusca*, once widespread in south-central Sri Lanka, now listed as near threatened.

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