

# State and Local

## 'Spider Bob' says he enjoys researching insects

## Fish stinging swimmers in Galveston

By Jade Boyd  
Reporter



"Spider" Bob Breene

Photo by Robert W. Rizzo

Bob Breene considers himself an honorary invertebrate.

Unless you spend much time at the Entomological Research Lab or saw a spring performance by Naked Lunch, a local rock band Bob played with earlier this year, you probably haven't seen Spider Bob. Once seen, Spider Bob is not easily forgotten.

Bob is thin and his hairline is receding, but he still keeps a good three or four inches of curls in the back. He's 35 but he could pass for 34. Now that summer is here, he usually wears flip-flops, cut-offs and a T-shirt with a spider emblem on the front. At these times Spider Bob's walk is most amusing.

The flip-flops turn Bob's walk into a shuffle. Only his legs move and they look too thin to support anyone shuffling as fast as Spider Bob. When he's skating around the well-waxed floors of the lab, Bob is a hard man to keep up with.

A typical day for Bob is anywhere from 8 to 14 hours long, depending on the weather and research needs of the day. It might start in the field or at the lab, but it always starts and finishes with spiders.

Arachnology, the study of spiders, is Bob's field. Barring unforeseen setbacks, he'll have his doctorate next year. It's been a long time coming and a struggle most of the way.

At 15, Bob quit attending high school and moved out on his own. For five years, he held odd jobs and played guitar for various blues and rock 'n' roll bands.

"The only difference that made — not going to high school — was one letter grade in chemistry, math and physics," Bob says. "I had some (science education), but not on my own."

After getting his GED in 1972 at Temple University, Bob decided to leave Philadelphia and go back to his hometown of Columbus, Ohio. He began attending Ohio State University in 1973.

"Once I got into biology, I knew I

didn't want to be a general biologist, so I looked around for a specialty and I just got fascinated with insects," Bob says.

Why insects?

"They're real neat," Bob says mat-

ter-of-factly. "Also, I like ecology and I'm attracted to detail and diversity."

With no financial assistance, Spider Bob was still a freshman two years later. He went to visit his fa-

ther in Nevada and quickly fell in love with the state's deserts.

"It's the prettiest place," Bob says. And after a pause, "And very few vertebrates. I like that." He laughs.

Spider Bob's laugh is staccato, jovial and, in spite of the mischievous gleam in his eye, it is not threatening — it's contagious.

In 1976, Spider Bob was working as a cowboy on a ranch in Nevada. Later that year, he moved to Reno and started dealing keno on the swing shift at a casino. He attended classes full time, and in less than a year was exhausted and had barely achieved sophomore status.

"That's when I finally realized there had to be another way to do it," Bob says.

Bob joined the Air Force.

"They discontinued the old GI Bill on January 1, 1977, and I took the oath on December 30, 1976," Bob laughs. "I went in and asked them, 'What's the minimum time I can stay in and get the maximum GI Bill?' and they said, '18 months.' So I stayed in 18 months and one day — just to make sure."

In the spring of 1979, Spider Bob enrolled at Texas A&M.

But after getting a bachelor's degree in entomology, he began to worry that no one would hire him just to study spiders, so he got a master's degree in agriculture and spent a year at the University of Tennessee.

Spider Bob returned to College Station in April 1985 and started on his doctorate, working for Dr. Winfield Sterling, an A&M entomologist, as a research assistant.

"I knew Sterling was a spider sympathizer," Bob says, laughing.

Currently, Bob is researching the last major uneradicated cotton pest — the cotton flea hopper. He's trying to prove that the natural predators in the cotton field — spiders — can take care of the flea hoppers. If this is true, spraying with pesticides is costing farmers money.

For the last year Spider Bob has been raising thousands of flea hoppers. He then makes them 'hot,' or

radioactive, and releases them in his cotton test field. A day after the release Bob goes back to the field and vacuums the rows on which the flea hoppers were released.

Back at the lab, he sifts through the collected material. The spiders, some of which are only a few millimeters long, must be sorted, identified and checked for radiation levels.

The data collected so far looks promising. The spiders are eating quite a few 'hot' flea hoppers.

Spider Bob admits he takes a great deal of criticism about his chosen field.

"A lot of people have almost an innate fear of them," he says. "It turns out they are quite beneficial in a lot of areas."

Bob is a firm believer that pure science can be just as beneficial as applied science.

"For instance, my black widow deal," Bob says. "I found out they (males) can mate over and over and over again, and more or less put the nail in the coffin about that myth. I found the male could easily escape, and that the great exception to the rule was that the males got eaten and not the other way around."

"That's when I realized the only reason the name 'black widow' got started was because stupid researchers in the past had put a male in where he couldn't escape. In the wild there's very little chance of that. He's got too many defenses."

"That's pure science. It's not going to benefit anybody, but I think it's every bit as important as applied science."

"Science for science's sake is enough. It doesn't need to be applied which, unfortunately, is the way everything is going these days. They want you to turn a buck before you even start your project."

So what's next for Spider Bob?

"I always thought the best thing a person could be was an arachnologist, but I've made that now," he says.

"So there's only one other goal and that's to be the best arachnologist of all time — past, present or future — and I'm guaranteed to die trying."

GALVESTON (AP) — Lifeguards are warning swimmers off Galveston Island to beware of barb-stinging cownose rays, which have stung 25 people since the Fourth of July weekend.

"So far we haven't had any serious injuries, mostly puncture wounds," said Lt. Vic Maceo, director of the Galveston County Beach Patrol. "But I've never seen anything like this."

The cownose rays are a flat, round filter fish that resemble small stingrays. They tend to be scared off by groups of people and tend to retreat from shallow areas by late morning, he said.

Maceo said that beginning Wednesday, lifeguards were making morning addresses on beach public address systems, warning beachgoers of the hazards and urging them to be on the lookout for the fish, which measure about two feet in diameter.

Unlike stingrays, the cownose ray, so-called because of its cow-like nose, does not lie unseen beneath the sand and has a harder time stinging its victim, Maceo said.

"They also swim in groups and can be seen easily," Maceo said. "They usually hang in troughs in a few inches of water."

Roy Drinnen, fish curator at Sea-Arama Marineworld said anyone stung should see a doctor.

"They don't carry any poison, but they are dirty," Drinnen said.

### Correction

The byline on a story published in Wednesday's issue of *The Battalion* about Joan Maffei, a local painter, was mistakenly not included. Susan Akin, a reporter for *The Battalion*, wrote the story.

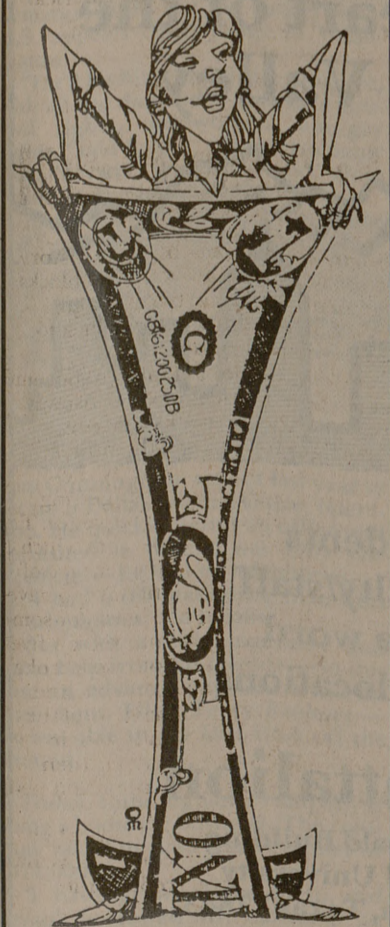
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