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Inviabile egg production in Theridion rufipes
(Araneae, Theridiidae): a harvest
for first instar spiderlings

Thesis submitted by
Michael Frank DOWNES, BSc (James Cook)
in November 1985

For the research degree of Master of Science
in the Faculty of Science of the
James Cook University of North Queensland

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"Some of the spiderlings appeared to feed on the infertile eggs in their egg mass...Further study might show that...this early nutrient (is) of value in survival patterns of a population."

Peck and Whitcomb 1970

"It would be interesting to investigate the hypothesis that sterile eggs in fertile egg sacs have been selected for as 'trophic eggs'."

Jackson 1978

Frontispiece: Prefed and prefasted first instar

Theridion rufipes spiderlings. There
are two such contrasted pairs in this
photograph. x 20



CONTENTS

	<u>Page</u>
List of Tables	viii
List of Figures	ix
List of Plates	xii
Source Statement	xv
Acknowledgements	xvi
Abstract	1
Chapter 1. General introduction	3
Chapter 2. General materials and methods	9
Chapter 3. General results and discussion	
(Analysis of variance)	18
Chapter 4. Postembryonic Development	
4.1. Introduction	23
4.2. Materials and methods	25
4.3. Results	
4.3.1. An account of development to first instar	26
4.3.2. Developmental rates	37

4.4. Discussion	
4.4.1. A review of early postembryonic development in spiders	41
4.4.2. Developmental rate	51
Chapter 5. Oophagy - the investment	
5.1. Introduction	56
5.2. Materials and methods	59
5.3. Results	62
5.4. Discussion	64
Chapter 6. Fecundity and the egg sac sequence	
6.1. Introduction	69
6.2. Materials and methods	70
6.3. Results	71
6.4. Discussion	74
Chapter 7. Temperature effects	
7.1. Introduction	79
7.2. Materials and methods	80
7.3. Results	82
7.4. Discussion	87
Chapter 8. Feeding effects	
8.1. Introduction	89
8.2. Materials and methods	90
8.3. Results	92
8.4. Discussion	97

Chapter 9. Locality and population structure	
9.1. Introduction	100
9.2. Materials and methods	100
9.3. Results	101
9.4. Discussion	102
Chapter 10. Disturbance and confinement	
10.1. Introduction	105
10.2. Materials and methods	105
10.3. Results	106
10.4. Discussion	107
Chapter 11. Survival - the dividend	
11.1. Introduction	110
11.2. Materials and methods	112
11.3. Results	113
11.4. Discussion	116
Concluding remarks	129
References	135
Appendices	
Appendix 1a. Sac data record sheets	144
Appendix 1b. Sac data summary sheet	145
Appendix 2. Some comparable data for three other theridiid spiders	146

TABLES

1. Fecundity and fertility variation between individual females, with and without respect to feeding rate.	19
2. The effects of FEEDST, FOODTYPE, SACNO and ORIGIN on fecundity and fertility.	21
3. Death likelihood and development failure prior to emergence.	28
4. Effect of temperature on mean time from mating to first oviposition and between subsequent ovipositions.	40
5. Correlation coefficients for single- sac fecundity vs. egg sac production rate	73
6. Mean fecundity expressed as egg productivity per unit time, for three feed rates.	96

7. Overall mean fecundity and mean proportional inviability of laboratory and field egg sacs.	107
8. Survival times and preferred molting in starved spiderlings.	121
9. Frequency distributions of INVIABILITY 1 and INFERTILITY	133

FIGURES

1a. Mean development times from oviposition to hatching (H), molting (M) and emergence (E).	38
1b. Embryonic and postembryonic development rates.	39
2. The hatching process in spiders: a schematic presentation of the results of fourteen authors.	44
3. Egg size, proportional fertility and probability of failure to develop.	61

4a. Fecundity over the egg sac sequence.	77
4b. Proportional inviability and infertility over the egg sac sequence.	77
5. Cul-de-sac (A) and conduit (B) reproductive anatomy in spiders.	78
6. Mean fecundity and mean proportional inviability and infertility in relation to temperature.	84
7a. Mean monthly fecundity and mean proportional inviability and infertility, field-free specimens.	85
7b. Mean monthly fecundity and mean proportional inviability and infertility, field-captive specimens.	86
8. Mean fecundity and mean proportional inviability and infertility in relation to rate of feeding.	93

9. Mean fecundity and mean proportional inviability and infertility in relation to last prey type consumed before oviposition. 94

10. Mean fecundity and mean proportional inviability and infertility in relation to the time elapsed between feeding and ovipositing. 95

11. Mean fecundity and mean proportional inviability and infertility of subpopulations (demes), (a) between 1980-85 and (b) in 1985 104

12. Mean fecundity and mean proportional inviability and infertility in relation to the time elapsed since a vial change. 109

13. Mean fecundity and mean proportional inviability and infertility in relation to location of mating. 109

14. Post-emergence starvation resistance and molting probability, in relation to amount of egg material consumed prior to emergence	
(a) Mean resistance time, first instar spiderlings	123
(b) Maximum resistance time, first instar spiderlings	124
(c) Probability of molting to second instar	125
(d) Minimum resistance time, second instar spiderlings	126
(e) Mean resistance time, second instar spiderlings	127
(f) Maximum resistance time, second instar spiderlings	128

PLATES

Frontispiece - Prefed and prefasted first
instar T. rufipes spiderlings iv

1. <u>Theridion rufipes</u> adults. Male (a) and Female (b)	7
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2a. Containers and slides used in the study	12
2b. The egg sac of <u>T. rufipes</u>	12
3a. General appearance of the contents of a full-term <u>T. rufipes</u> egg sac	13
3b. Empty eggshells	13
4a. The eggs of <u>T. rufipes</u>	29
4b. Post-reversion stage	29
5a. Hatching - chorionic stress	30
5b. Hatching - rupture of the chorion	30
6a. Hatching - disposition of the appendages	31
6b. Postembryos - general appearance	31
7a. Postembryos - eyes and pedipalp segmentation	32
7b. The first molt - flexure	32

xiv

8a. The first molt - extension	33
8b. Exuvium of the first molt	33
9. First instar spiderlings	34
10a. An undeveloped egg among postembryos	55
10b. First instar spiderlings feeding on an egg and on a sibling	55

DECLARATION

I declare that this thesis is my own work and has not been submitted in any form for another degree or diploma at any university or other institute of tertiary education. Information derived from the published or unpublished work of others has been acknowledged in the text and a list of references is given.

M F Downes

September 1985

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My family, for putting up with it

ABSTRACT

Most of the variability in fecundity and fertility in Theridion rufipes is due to differences between individual females. Food availability is the most influential extrinsic factor controlling fecundity and fertility, and the type of food consumed may also have an effect. Fecundity increases in the later egg sacs of the egg sac sequence.

Neither variations in fixed laboratory temperatures nor variations in prevailing field temperatures affect fecundity or fertility, but both development rate and oviposition intervals are markedly influenced by temperature. At a constant temperature of 20° C, development is halted and oviposition interval is greatly extended. At 25° C and 30° C, development proceeds normally and there is no significant difference in mean oviposition interval.

Some differences exist between the two relatively isolated subpopulations of T rufipes from which experimental specimens were obtained.

The eggs vary in diameter from 0.55 mm to 0.80 mm, the smaller eggs being less likely to develop. The undeveloped eggs are used as a food resource by the first instar spiderlings before they leave the egg sac and disperse. This extra nourishment enables spiderlings to survive without feeding again for up to four times as long as they can without such benefit, enhancing their survival

prospects during the dispersal and habitat-selection phase. Many spiderlings that feed on eggs prior to emergence are able to molt to second instar without further nourishment; the size increase resulting from the molt may widen the available prey spectrum.

The mean proportion of inviable eggs in an egg sac is 0.21 (s.e. = 0.01). These values indicate a marked tendency to provide an amount of extra food-egg yolk material that would approximately double the starvation resistance time during the dispersal and settlement phase. It may be impossible or less efficient to provide an appropriate equivalent amount of extra yolk in each egg at oviposition.

Egg-feeding does not occur in the postembryo stage. An account is given of postembryonic development and a proposal is made for standardization of the terms describing araneid early development stages.