

## **TBZ Creature Feature: Vegetarian Jumping Spiders**

What is so rare and special about this spider? In the entire world, there are about 40,000 species of spiders lurking about, and they are known to hunt and eat insects.

But not so with this Belize Zoo fellow! Its name is the Vegetarian Jumping Spider, *Bagheera kiplingi*, and is found happy at home living among the leaves of the Bulls Horn Acacia! This small tree is a common find on zoo grounds, and a casual search will likely turn up a view of this attractive little spider. Metallic green in colour, with prominent eyes, the Vegetarian Jumping Spider is about the size of the nail on your pinky. Unlike its spider relatives who hunt and eat a variety of insects, this little unique spider actively "hunts" tender leaves of the Bull's Horn Acacia. Now this may sound easy, but a major challenge is involved with each food quest... These same tender leaves are diligently guarded by aggressive ants living in the same Bull's Horn Acacia tree.

The job of these biting ants is to keep leaf-eating critters away from the leaves. This allows the tree to grow without being damaged by critters who want to eat its leaves. In turn, the tree shows its thanks to the guard ants by providing them with a secure home and plenty of food to eat.

So, in order to happily munch away on its favourite leafy meal, the Vegetarian Jumping Spider has to literally "sneak" past its ant neighbor. Sometimes, the spider employs a unique strategy where it will drop a ladder made of silk, and then use this to quickly get out of range of the guard ants.

And yes, there are other plants around with tender green leaves, but oddly, the Vegetarian Jumping Spider is ONLY found living on the Bull's Horn Acacia. This plant is definitely its one and only Home Sweet Home.

This is a spider which simply baffles scientists. Only discovered within the past decade, the Vegetarian Jumping Spider shows the unique quality of tropical biodiversity, and also, the

natural wonders of our Belizean nature! The next time you wander around the grounds of the zoo, do a "spider search" among any of the Bull's Horn Acacia trees growing among the pathways. Your "spider hunt" is likely to turn up a view of one of the rarest creatures in the world: The Vegetarian Jumping Spider!!