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Media Information and Images: David Garner 01904 432153



Everything you wanted to know about spiders

Are you scared of spiders? Want to try and conquer your fear? Love them or loathe them, there is no doubting the fascination of arachnids.

Did you know that spiders breathe through a hole in their stomachs? Or that spider silk is as strong as steel? Find out even more amazing facts about these compelling creatures at a special Spider Workshop in York organised by the national Open Air Laboratories (OPAL) project.

The University of York OPAL team is running the workshop in the Museum Gardens on Sunday 7 December 2008 (12noon-3pm) to mark the national launch of OPAL, which aims to encourage people to explore their local environment.

Pupils from Year 5 at St Lawrence's CE Primary School in York were given a sneak preview of the workshop when they visited the University's campus. They learned different techniques for catching spiders, making sweep nets out of plastic bags and bits of wire, looking at their finds using a microscope attached to a computer, and designing a leaflet to show people how to keep spiders as pets!

All these activities along with spider quizzes, arts and crafts and special guests will be available at the Spider Workshop on 7 December. All activities will be free and there will be chance to win prizes.

Sarah West, OPAL Community Scientist, said "I've always been a bit scared of spiders but after seeing them up close under a microscope I've realised how amazing they are! The workshop will be fun for people of all ages – there will be face-painting, spider hunting, and the opportunity to do spider-related arts and crafts with BTCV and the Yorkshire Wildlife Trust. There will be something for everyone!"

The OPAL network is an exciting new initiative supported by The Big Lottery Fund. Through partnerships nation-wide, OPAL encourages people to explore and study their local environments and runs projects to appeal to everyone. From playing fields and window boxes to backyards or beaches, all spaces are different and all are important for wildlife.

The five year programme will bring scientists and the public closer together, to explore environmental issues that have both local and global relevance. The University of York's Environment Department and the Stockholm Environment Institute are running OPAL projects with communities across Yorkshire and the Humber. For more information, please contact them at opalproject@york.ac.uk or 01904 434577.

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Notes for editors:

- The Open Air Laboratories (OPAL) network received an £11.7m grant from The Big Lottery Fund in August 2007. OPAL aims to create a new generation of nature-lovers by getting people to engage with the natural world around them.
- The Environment Department at the University of York was founded in 1992, initially to integrate ecological and environmental sciences with environmental economics. The aim was to improve understanding of environmental problems, and how to solve

them, through the consideration of both the human dimension and the underpinning science. Its objective is to develop sustainable solutions to environmental problems that are consistent with human aspirations and with global, regional and local institutions and markets. More information at www.york.ac.uk/depts/eeem/

- More information on the Stockholm Environment Institute at York at www.sei.se