

# Volunteer's Spider Observations Spur New Discovery

## Te Papa Takes Notice

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**M**anawatu Estuary Trust volunteer Armin Littlek has spent years observing the katipō spider at Foxton Beach and has made a new discovery which could change the way these spiders are protected.

By carefully taking notes and photographs of the spiders, Littlek has discovered the introduced false katipō spider is eating its native namesake - the first time this has been suggested.

"I started noticing dead katipō next to false katipō, which got me observing more closely," he said.

New Zealand's only spider with a distinct Te Reo Māori name (everything else is known simply as pūngāwerewere), the katipō is an important part of the coastal ecosystem, with Foxton Beach's local katipō having a fondness for eating amphipods like sandhoppers.

They also have a spellbinding way of travelling in the air even on a windless day, sensing tiny electrical currents in the air and riding them with a strand of silk.

Despite their reputation as New Zealand's only venomous native spider ('katipō roughly translates to 'night stinger') they prefer to be left alone. People live and walk near katipō all their lives without knowing they are there, so observing their behaviour takes patience.

"Katipō and false katipō can live together for a long time," Littlek said, "until food gets scarce, then the katipō can get eaten! An alarmingly large number of invasive spiders are preying on katipō



Armin Littlek (with high-vis vest) shows guests the dune gardens.

and their numbers are increasing."

Littlek is now sharing his discovery with the community, starting with a presentation to the Horowhenua Branch of Forest and Bird where he was joined by Te Papas Dr. Phil Sirvid, a curator who specialises in arachnids.

"Armin showed me things about katipō I never thought possible by virtue of being out there day after day observing," said Dr. Sirvid.

"It's not a formal study but it is proven to be quite real."

Dr. Sirvid hopes Littlek's findings can

be further studied by a Masters or PhD student in the near future, and urges the Department of Conservation to take note of the new discovery to help the katipō, which have been fully protected since 2010.

However, the biggest threat to katipō isn't its hungry new neighbours but the very dunes they live on.

"Getting buried by sand is their number one killer. Storms naturally control the population," said Littlek.

So they need all the help they can get.



Below: A Katipō in its home under a piece of driftwood which it shared with three others.