

Ballooning Spiders

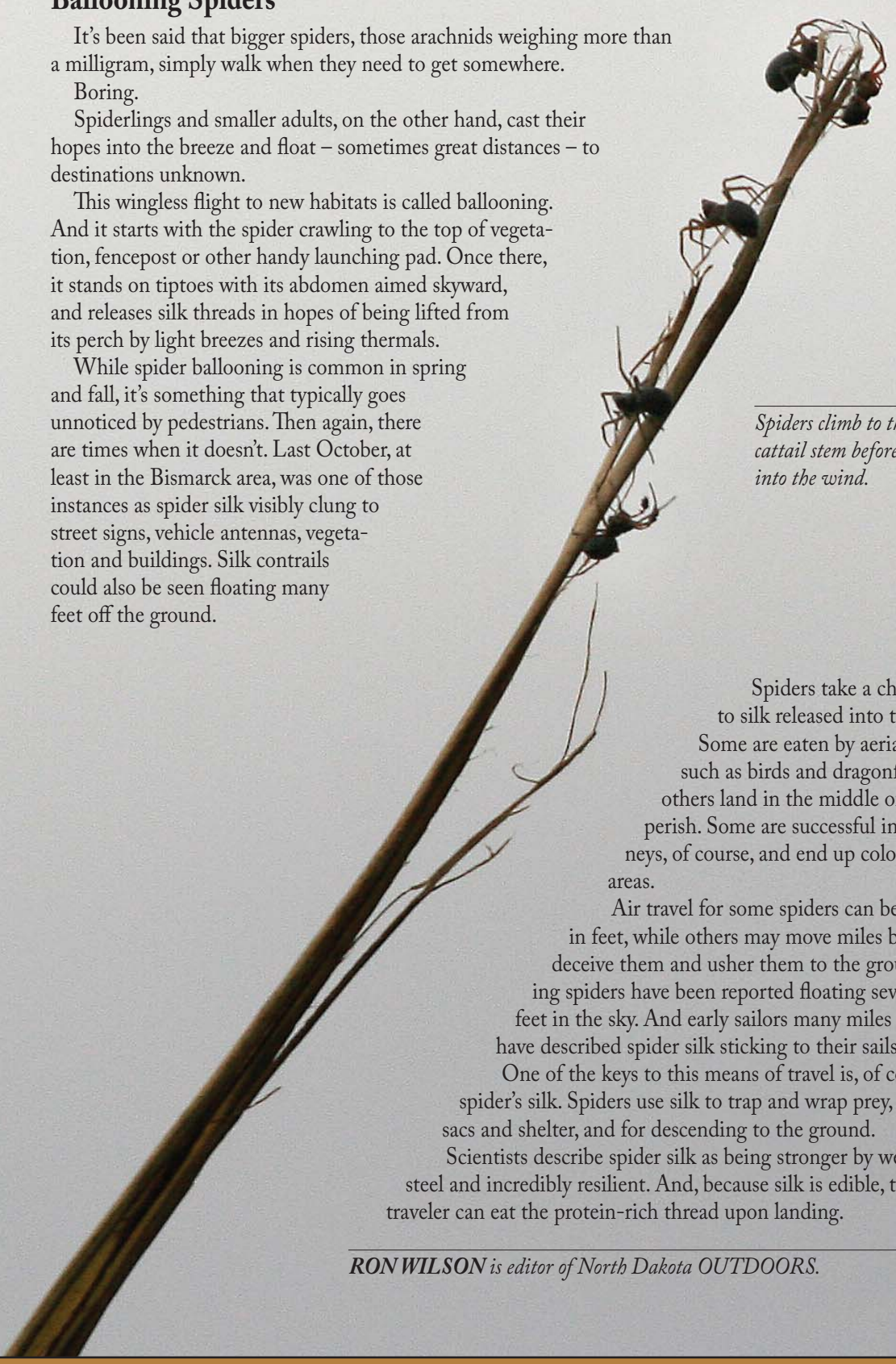
It's been said that bigger spiders, those arachnids weighing more than a milligram, simply walk when they need to get somewhere.

Boring.

Spiderlings and smaller adults, on the other hand, cast their hopes into the breeze and float – sometimes great distances – to destinations unknown.

This wingless flight to new habitats is called ballooning. And it starts with the spider crawling to the top of vegetation, fencepost or other handy launching pad. Once there, it stands on tiptoes with its abdomen aimed skyward, and releases silk threads in hopes of being lifted from its perch by light breezes and rising thermals.

While spider ballooning is common in spring and fall, it's something that typically goes unnoticed by pedestrians. Then again, there are times when it doesn't. Last October, at least in the Bismarck area, was one of those instances as spider silk visibly clung to street signs, vehicle antennas, vegetation and buildings. Silk contrails could also be seen floating many feet off the ground.



Spiders climb to the top of a cattail stem before “ballooning” into the wind.

Spiders take a chance clinging to silk released into the breeze.

Some are eaten by aerial predators such as birds and dragonflies, while others land in the middle of lakes and perish. Some are successful in their journeys, of course, and end up colonizing new areas.

Air travel for some spiders can be measured in feet, while others may move miles before winds deceive them and usher them to the ground. Ballooning spiders have been reported floating several thousand feet in the sky. And early sailors many miles out to sea have described spider silk sticking to their sails.

One of the keys to this means of travel is, of course, the spider's silk. Spiders use silk to trap and wrap prey, build eggs sacs and shelter, and for descending to the ground.

Scientists describe spider silk as being stronger by weight than steel and incredibly resilient. And, because silk is edible, the hungry traveler can eat the protein-rich thread upon landing.

RON WILSON is editor of North Dakota OUTDOORS.