



John Harmer

Mudpuppy's Pond

***Look! Up in the sky! It's a bird! It's a plane! NO!
It's a... SPIDER!***

Does that mean spiders can fly? Not at all. But they do have a very unique way of traveling that is like flying, in its own way. It's called *ballooning*.

On warm fall days, you might notice silky threads floating through the air. These threads are spun by spiders and are called "gossamers" (gossamer comes from an old English word meaning "goose summer" and refers to a period of warm weather in November). The spiders that spin these gossamers are young, newly hatched spiders called "*spiderlings*". Spiderlings do not build webs; instead, using their *spinnerettes*, they produce long strands of spider silk, attached on one end to an object like a fencepost or plant. Then they wait for a breeze and take off, drifting on the wind! Could this be how bungee jumping got started?



Riding the *thermals* (warm air currents, also used by birds) is how the spiderlings travel to new locations. Sometimes they land in unusual places. For instance, ballooning spiders have been found landing on the decks of ships as far as two hundred miles out at sea! Scientists have collected ballooning spiderlings as high as 10,000 feet in the sky.

Some of the ballooning spiders land in good spots for spiders to live and are able to develop into adults there. And sure enough, they will produce new spiderlings to carry on the family ballooning tradition. —Diane Clark