

THE BOOTH MUSEUM OF NATURAL HISTORY

False Black Widows and Other Household Spiders

Spiders can quite unnecessarily evoke all kinds of dread and fear. The Press does not help by publishing inaccurate and often alarmist stories about them. Spiders are in fact one of our very important beneficial creatures. Spiders in the UK devour a weight of insect 'pests' equivalent to that of the nation's human population!

During the mid-late summer, many spiders mature and as a result become more obvious as they have then grown to their full size. One of these species is *Steatoda nobilis*. It came from the Canary and Madeiran Islands into Devon over a 100 years ago, being first recorded in Britain near Torquay in 1879! However it was not described from Britain until 1993,



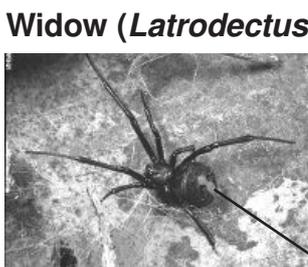
when it was known to have occurred since at least 1986 and 1989 as flourishing populations in Portsmouth (Hampshire) and Swanage (Dorset). There was also a population in Westcliff-on-Sea (Essex) recorded in 1990, and another in Littlehampton and Worthing (West Sussex). Its distribution is spreading more widely along the coast in the south and also inland, with confirmed records from South Devon, East Sussex, Kent, Surrey and Warwick. The large, grape-like individuals are the females and the smaller, more elongate ones, the males.



These spiders are have become known as False Widows and, because of their colour, shape and size, are frequently mistaken for the Black Widow Spider that are found in warmer climates, but not in Britain (although some occasionally come into the country in packaged fruit and flowers).

Black Widow Spiders belong to the world-wide genus *Latrodectus*. They have a nasty bite and do occasionally kill. These are found around the world, including southern Europe, southern USA and Mexico, the Middle East and Australia. In Europe *Latrodectus tredecimguttatus*, the Mediterranean Black Widow (or European Black Widow) can cause problems. In the USA the Southern Black

Widow (*Latrodectus mactans*) (right), with the famed red hourglass pattern, the Northern Black Widow (*Latrodectus variolus*), and the Western Black Widow (*Latrodectus hesperus*) can be found. These are found around the world, including southern Europe, southern USA and Mexico, the Middle East and Australia.



Widow (*Latrodectus mactans*) (right), with the famed red hourglass pattern, the Northern Black Widow (*Latrodectus variolus*), and the Western Black Widow (*Latrodectus hesperus*) can be found. These are found around the world, including southern Europe, southern USA and Mexico, the Middle East and Australia.



red mark
on back on belly

In Australia, the infamous Redback Spider (Funnel Web Spider) (left) *Latrodectus hasselti* is common. Neither of these are found in the UK.

The false widow spider, *Steatoda nobilis* spins a tangled web-like other members of the Theridiidae family, which are known as 'Button Spiders'. In the UK two species are commonly mistaken for black widow spiders. They are *Steatoda bipunctata*, or the Rabbit Hutch Spider, and the one that most resembles the Black Widow species, *Steatoda grossa*.

Steatoda nobilis has a distinctive pattern of pale markings on its brown abdomen. Females grow to 15mm. It is closely related to the widespread and common spider of houses and outhouses *Steatoda bipunctata*, but this species has little pattern, with a whitish line around the front of the abdomen and sometimes a line down the middle of it. Both sexes of *S. nobilis* are also larger than those of *S. bipunctata*. *S. nobilis* is the one most likely to cause a bad reaction if it bites.



Steatoda grossa



Steatoda bipunctata

Steatoda grossa lives in houses, in walls, fences and the barks of trees and eat insects, other invertebrates and even other spiders. They can also be found behind stacked timber, in conservatories, sheds, under window-sills, in garages and even indoors. Favourable weather, particularly the mild winters of late (2004-2008), have favoured the spread of these spiders.



The likelihood of being bitten by a false widow spider is extremely low, the spider preferring to stay hidden in its web. No one has ever died of a spider bite in the UK and the number of reported bites from spiders is small, but this year there has been an increase locally.

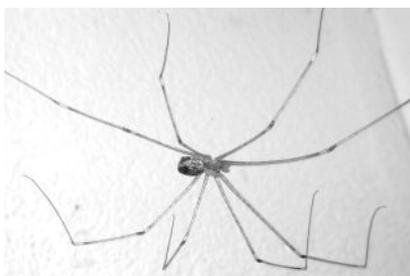
We share our houses with all kinds of creatures which includes over a dozen species of spiders.



Some of these are permanent residents, whilst others just call in or are brought in accidentally.

The spider with the brick-red head-thorax and pale creamy brown abdomen is the Woodlouse Spider, *Dysdera crocata*. This species has enormous jaws designed to

catch and kill its tough prey. The occasionally make their way indoors and can, albeit extremely rarely, nip you.



Up high, often in the angle of the ceiling and wall, are the spindly Daddy-long-legs Spiders, *Pholcus phalangoides*.



At night a small, pale Spitting Spider, *Scytodes thorasica*, might be seen on patrol. This odd little creature squirts a sticky material at its prey in order to pin it down! Quite harmless to us though.

The spider most likely to be seen in a house, especially at night, and the one most likely to be in the bath is the House Spider, *Tegenaria domestica*. They don't fall into the bath but



climb down for a drink of water at the plug-hole. The slippery sides of the bath prevent them from getting out again. Leave a towel draped over the edge of the bath for them to use to escape then you will not see any in the bath. It is not fair to wash them down the plug-hole! They, together with the other spider residents, eat a

lot of pesty insects which also share your home and so pay rent for their keep.



Around 35,000 species of spiders occur worldwide. As predators they, like snakes, use venom to subdue or kill their prey. However, the venom of most species has little or no effect on people and most would not be interested in biting nor can their jaws puncture human skin. Most people are unlikely to come into contact with many of the species.

There are two basic types of venom which may or may not be combined together. These are neurotoxic venom (that affects the nervous system) and necrotic venom (that dissolves the tissues).

There are over 640 species of spider in Britain, and only a dozen of these have been known to bite humans. These include the two *Steatoda* species, *Steatoda grossa* and *Steatoda nobilis*. The severity of symptoms from any spider bite depends on the amount of venom that is injected. Symptoms from the bites of most of these are similar, with local pain and swelling, and are certainly no worse than those from a bee or wasp sting. The pain can become more intense and start radiating, and other symptoms may follow, including local sweating (indicating parasympathetic stimulation) and feverishness. False Widow Spider bite reports include symptoms such as chest pains, and swelling and tingling of fingers. Should any severe symptoms occur it is recommended that medical advice be sought and it is important to stress the fact that you have been bitten. Ideally keep the spider as evidence.

What should I do if I am bitten?

1. Wash the bite with soap and water.
2. Apply a cool compress/ice-pack (care not to cause a cold burn; don't leave on for more than a few minutes at a time).
3. If possible apply a bite spray such as 'Waspeze'[™].
4. If necessary, take over-the-counter medication to control pain or itching (e.g. antihistamine cream and suitable painkiller).
5. Antibiotics are not helpful unless the wound becomes infected;
6. Do not cut or apply suction to the wound.
7. Monitor the bite for redness, swelling, pain, or signs of infection.
8. Monitor breathing, sweating and general demeanour.
8. Re-apply Bite Rx to control bite symptoms and promote healing.
9. If redness, swelling or pain does not subside or there are signs of infection consult your doctor.

What should you do if you find any false widow spiders, or any others for that matter? Not a lot! If they are outside, it is impossible to eradicate them as there are just too many of them and, if you were to kill those in your garden others would come in to fill the niche. Indoors it is a different matter as they can be controlled simply by vacuuming them up. Some commercial sprays from garden centres, hardware shops do work, but not very well

because the spiders can hide in their webs. Areas beneath beds, behind settees and curtains, and under cupboards are the places they are likely to occur if they do find their way indoors. We have to live with them as we do wasps or mosquitoes. And don't forget – spiders are very helpful so unless you have False Widows, leave them alone.

Gerald Legg 2009