

Noble False Widow spider

(*Steatoda nobilis*)



Advancing Arachnology

Even Jones



Female Noble False Widow spider

The Noble False Widow spider is a native of the Canary Islands and Madeira, now living peacefully in Britain. Melodramatic tales about it sometimes appear in the media - here is the real story.

No need to fear

The Noble False Widow spider became suddenly notorious thanks to wildly inaccurate claims in the media in 2013. Although present on the south coast of England for over a century, its more recent spread northwards caught the public's imagination. Media reports at that time described 'plagues', 'tides' and influxes of 'killer spiders' 'invading' Britain, and attributed many horrific wounds to their bites. It's true it is in the same family as the notorious black widow spiders (*Latrodectus* species), common across the world in hotter climates, but the species in Britain poses virtually no threat to us or our domestic animals.

Here are the facts behind the headlines.

You'll see it's suffered a very bad press.

Why the name?

'Noble' perhaps because it's the largest and most handsomely marked of Britain's three false widow species. 'False Widow' because it's a distant cousin of the Black Widow but has nothing like its 'fire-power'.

The three false widows in Britain

The Noble False Widow (*Steatoda nobilis*) is one of three false widow (*Steatoda*) species that may be found in and around buildings in Britain. All have very shiny abdomens with a more-or-less distinct white half-moon

at the very front.



Male *Steatoda bipunctata*



Bruce Crowe

Female *Steatoda grossa*

Steatoda nobilis

Noble False Widow
Average male actual size
(Length range 7-10 mm)
Average female actual size
(Length range 8.5-14 mm)

All these species may be confused with other common British spiders – visit the Spider Recording Scheme website britishspiders.org.uk/srs_false_widows for more information.

Steatoda bipunctata

Average male actual size
(Length range 4-5 mm)
Average female actual size
(Length range 4.5-7 mm)

- By far the most common and widespread species.
- Has lived in and around buildings for thousands of years.
- No pale mottling on abdomen, but males often have a white line down the middle (see photo).

Steatoda grossa

Average male actual size
(Length range 4-6 mm)
Average female actual size
(Length range 6.5-10 mm)

- A native species, quite common in the south, much scarcer further north.
- Abdomen brown with a series of white spots in juveniles and adult males; adult females often plain brown.

FACT FILE

Noble False Widow spider (*Steatoda nobilis*)

Body length: males, 7-10 mm; females, 8.5-14 mm.

Colour: the overall impression is one of brown and cream mottling

- Cephalothorax (front section of body) – a uniform, very dark, brown
- Abdomen (back section) – oval, with creamish and dark brown marks varying in size
- Legs – varied shades of brown along their length, usually not clearly banded.

Habitat: gardens, sheds, window frames, dark corners in houses.

Web: a messy, often large, tangled web of non-sticky (but very strong) silk, usually built in a corner with a tubular retreat partly hidden in a deep crack or hole.

But remember – large house spiders' webs look like this too (see Factsheet 2)

Life history

Adult males are usually found between July and November. Adult females can be found throughout the year but numbers generally peak at the same time as the males. Males are thought to live for only one year and die after mating but females take two years to become adult and may survive for a third year. Eggs are laid in a small, white, spherical egg sac anchored close to the web. The young hatch within the egg sac after two to four months, emerge and disperse by ballooning on silk threads.

People and Noble False Widow spiders

Although the vast majority of spiders use venom to subdue their prey, only a very small number of the larger species in Britain can bite into human skin. None of these species ever attack people, unprovoked. The only risk of being bitten comes from putting your hand into a web, handling a spider roughly or sitting or lying on one by mistake. Media reports of spider bites usually focus on Noble False Widows and, occasionally, on the smaller *Steatoda grossa* (the much smaller *Steatoda bipunctata* is extremely unlikely to be able to penetrate the skin of humans or pets). Noble False Widows are actually shy and rather sluggish. They spend most of their time in their webs although males may wander in search of females.

Ernie Jones



Female False Widow spider in web

Spider bites?

Although the Noble False Widow does have a more toxic bite than any native British spider, there are very few confirmed cases of them biting and none of serious injury as a direct result. Reliable evidence is hard to come by. In the absence of a bee or wasp, it's easy to jump to the conclusion that a spider is the culprit, but the perpetrator is rarely caught in the act for accurate identification.

Noble False Widow bites have been compared with a wasp sting; the pain is usually short-lived and (in rare cases) may result in feeling unwell for a day or so. The neurotoxins in the venom don't cause the bacterial infections – or 'necroses' – often attributed to spider bites in the press. These infections are much more likely to result from dirty splinter wounds or scratching insect bites with a dirty finger-nail. In contrast to wasp and bee stings, spider bites are extremely unlikely to cause an allergic reaction.

To put this into context, the chance of a spider bite in Britain is very much less than a bee- or wasp-sting – or even of a dog bite – and the consequences are generally less severe. Spider bites don't convey human diseases and, worldwide, spiders are major predators of insects such as mosquitoes that *do* transmit disease.

Serious problems with spider bites are likely to arise only if the bite becomes infected or if the person is already weakened by other health issues. As with any other injury, if swelling or ulceration results from a suspected spider bite you should seek immediate medical help.

Like many other species that have been accidentally introduced to Britain through global trade, and then been able to thrive in our warming climate, the Noble False Widow is here to stay. They have been living unnoticed in many houses for decades. By learning to identify them and understanding their habits you can reduce the very small risk of being bitten – and if you want to remove any spider from your house, just place a glass over it, slip a piece of card underneath and release it outside.



Geoff Oxford

Where are our Noble False Widows?

The Noble False Widow is a native of the Canary Islands and Madeira probably repeatedly imported into this country with bananas. It was first reported in Britain near Torquay in 1879. For the next 100 years or so it appears to have been confined to a few populations along the south coast but it is now spreading, probably as a result of global warming. By 2015 it was recorded across the southern half of the country and it is highly likely that it will continue to spread northwards. The species is now widespread across western and central Europe but there it is rarely blamed for biting.



Based on Spider Recording Scheme data 2015

Noble False Widows in Britain

And where are the real black widows?

- Warmer countries across the world where they're native, or have been introduced.
- Very rarely in Britain as accidental imports; the Natural History Museum sees about six a year, usually brought in on grapes from USA, South Africa or the Middle East. Most are dead on arrival.

For more information:

Bee, L., Oxford, G. & Smith, H. (2017) *Britain's Spiders*. Princeton WILDGuides

False widows and spider bites:

Visit britishspiders.org.uk/false_widows

Think you've found an imported spider?

If you find a spider you don't recognise in imported fruit, or in luggage after a trip abroad, keep it safe in a container and send a photograph to secretary@britishspiders.org.uk for identification and advice.

Terrified of spiders and want to get over it?

Look up ZSL London Zoo's 'Friendly Spider Programme' and arachnophobia treatment sessions at other UK zoos.

The British Arachnological Society

The BAS is Britain's only charity devoted exclusively to spiders and their relatives. We use science and education to advance the wider understanding and appreciation of arachnids, and to promote their conservation.

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