

Large house spider

(*Eratigena* species)



Advancing Arachnology

Geoff Oxford



Female *Eratigena saeva*

These spiders will be familiar to most people – they are the large, brown, hairy, long-legged ones that are particularly active and often seen in houses in late summer and autumn. Despite their size they are benign and pose absolutely no threat to humans or pets.

Identification

Our three species are identical in appearance and life histories. They can be told apart only by examining their sexual organs under a microscope.

Life history

The powder-blue young emerge from their egg sacs, together with 70 or so siblings, in late spring. After a few weeks they disperse, build their own miniature webs and start to feed. The young of the year moult two or three times before overwintering as half-grown juveniles. Growth resumes the following spring and the spiders reach maturity later that year - males in August or September and females a couple of weeks later. The newly-mature males leave their webs and search for the more sedentary females. This is the time of year when large house spiders are often seen running across carpets or become trapped in baths and sinks.

When a male finds a female that is soon to moult to maturity he moves into her retreat and stays close by, guarding her until she is adult. Repeated bouts of mating then occur with the male often lingering for the next few weeks to prevent the female mating with other partners. When cold weather comes the male dies - he's then about 18 months old. The female overwinters within her retreat and in spring, when temperatures



Above, Large house spider egg sac with fly decorations

Above right, Female *Eratigena saeva* in her web

FACT FILE

Large house spiders

Eratigena saeva, *Eratigena duellica* and *Eratigena atrica* (three species, no individual common names). These species were previously placed in the genus *Tegenaria*.

Body length: males, 10–14 mm; females, 11–16 mm.

Appearance:

- Cephalothorax (front section of body) – dark brown with pale brown central and lateral bands
- Abdomen (back section) – generally dark, with a lighter central stripe and a series of chevrons

- Legs – dark brown and unbanded and, in mature males, about 1.5 times longer than those of females of the same body length.

Habitat: dark corners of houses, sheds and garages as well as outside in rock and tree crevices, stone walls, disused rabbit holes, under rubble and similar places.



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and food supplies increase, she begins to build a series of egg sacs. These are hung close to the web and are about the size of a ring-finger nail. They are made of white silk and often decorated externally with the remains of past meals such as fly carcasses. The mother plays no further role in the lives of her offspring and usually dies before the next winter, when she's about 30 months old.

Webs

Large house spiders build 'funnel webs' consisting of a large, horizontal prey-catching sheet of silk with a tubular retreat in one corner. The web is made of multiple layers of silk and the legs of potential prey simply get

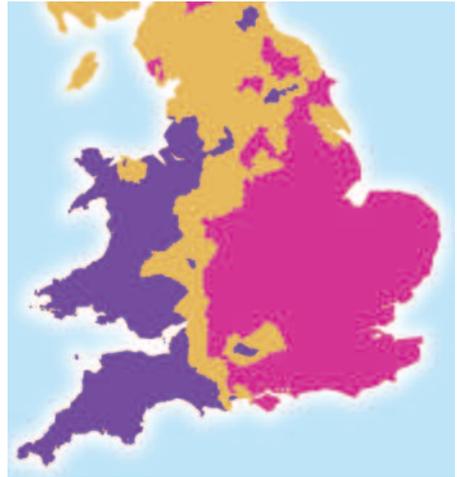
tangled up long enough for the spider to strike. None of the silken lines are sticky, unlike in the classic orb web.

Large spiders occupy large webs, as expected, but small spiders can also be found in large webs. Because the capture silk is not sticky, webs last a very long time, possibly years, without losing their effectiveness. During this period, after the original web builder dies, the web can be taken over by a succession of different spiders. One web, built by a mature female Large House spider in a garage in York (photograph above) subsequently became home over the course of three years to a juvenile female, other mature females, a mated pair and even a female of a different species.

Where are they?

In Britain *Eratigena saeva* and *Eratigena duellica* are common and widespread, but which one you have in your house depends on where you live (see map). The reason for this odd distribution is not known for certain, but might just reflect the way they recolonised Britain after the last ice-age, almost certainly with human help. In Yorkshire and Lancashire northwards, both species can be found anywhere – the east/west split so obvious in the south breaks down. This is also the case throughout Scotland. Where the species overlap they sometimes hybridise, producing young similar to the parents in every way except for the detailed structures of the sex organs, which are intermediate between the two. The third species, *Eratigena atrica*, is rare in most of Britain but locally very common in and around Newcastle-upon-Tyne. This is probably a result of chance importation by humans many years ago.

Taxonomic note: In 2013 it was proposed that these three large house spider species should be moved from the genus *Tegenaria* to a new



The distribution of *Eratigena saeva* (purple), *Eratigena duellica* (pink) and their area of overlap (orange)

genus, *Eratigena*, and regarded as just one species, *Eratigena atrica*. While the change in genus is well supported, the collapse of the three species into one is not.

For more information

britishspiders.org.uk/large_house_spiders

britishspiders.org.uk/srs_large_house_spiders

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Oxford, G. S. (2011) Large house spiders in the British Isles: past, present and future. *British Wildlife* 23: 34–41

The British Arachnological Society

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