



Brush up on your spiders

by Geoff Oxford



Many of our most impressive spiders, such as the large lace-web weavers (*Amaurobius* species), large house spiders (*Tegenaria* species) and the beautiful, invasive *Segestria florentina* (with green, iridescent jaws!) live deep within holes in walls and are almost impossible to lure out.

Over the years, people have devised several ways to fool these spiders so that they show themselves. So here are some tricks of the trade you could try at home – all of them rely on the spider thinking a ‘food-drop’ has arrived.

1. Tuning fork

The vibrations from a tuning fork match those set up in a web by the buzzing of a trapped fly. This method of luring spiders was first reported as long ago as 1880. The exact frequency of the tuning fork doesn't matter as long as it is somewhere around middle C (the one I use is C 523.3). First find a web and then strike one of the tuning fork prongs on something hard. Immediately apply the vibrating fork to the web and see what happens. There are films of enticing spiders in this way on YouTube – see, for example <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rCbCzRYQQHY> (where an E 440 tuning fork is used).

The problem with a tuning fork is that the vibrations stop pretty soon, and you have to strike it again.



Attracting spiders with a tuning fork

Photo: Peter Smithers

2. 'Fishing'

This method offers the spider the real thing – food. Fishing shops sell maggots (fly larvae) for eager fishermen to use as bait. If you ask nicely, the shop owner might just give you a few for free, otherwise you'll have to buy a quarter of a pint (= thousands of maggots). Alternatively, find a friend or relative who goes fishing and beg. Find a good web, horizontal ones work best (e.g. for *Tegenaria* species), and drop in a maggot towards the edge. It will wriggle and probably get itself tangled in the silk before the spider emerges.

Fishing doesn't work so well on wet webs as the maggot quickly slithers through the silk.





Large House spider (*Tegenaria saeva*) female investigating a red maggot. Her retreat is at the top. *Photo: Geoff Oxford*

3. Sonic toothbrush

A friend, Greg Hitchcock, suggested this method, and it works a treat. Many chemists and supermarkets sell cheap, battery-powered sonic toothbrushes (often on offer for £3 or less), but make sure you get a sonic, not just a ‘vibrating’, brush. The one I use is a Colgate 360 degree Surround which vibrates 20,000 times a minute (about 333 strokes a second) and runs on a replaceable AAA battery.

The vibrations from this brush mimic the wing-beat frequency of a medium-sized fly. What spider could refuse? Switch on and touch the web lightly. Be warned, however, the spider often shoots out of its retreat at frightening speed. This is not a job for wimps! Spiders are often very aggressive and attack the toothbrush with real feeling – one *Amaurobius* I teased out retreated to its hole carrying a toothbrush bristle in its jaws. The toothbrush method works well on both dry and wet webs.



Photo: Geoff Oxford

Large House spider (*Tegenaria saeva*) female enticed out of her retreat in a thick hedge with a sonic toothbrush.

If you want to catch the spider as a temporary 'pet' the last two methods are best. While the spider is busy extracting the maggot or attacking the toothbrush put a container over it from the top, trapping the spider against its web. Then bring a lid up from underneath the web and snap in place. You'll have to be quick though.

Some tips for keeping spiders appeared on pages 8 and 9 of the August-September 2013 issue of this magazine. Now that the weather is improving, spiders will start to resume active web-building, so collect your kit and have some fun. How many different sorts of spider can you entice out with these methods?