



What's large, black and with green, iridescent jaws?

by Geoff Oxford

The answer is *Segestria florentina*, one of three species of Tube spider found in Britain. Tube spiders, as their common name suggests, live in silk-lined crevices ('tubes') in walls, rocky outcrops and tree bark.

At the entrance to their tubes they build a fan of a dozen or so radiating threads against the wall or rock. These threads do not catch prey, as most other web types do, but serve as tripwires, signalling to the spider that something is crawling about nearby. Once alerted, the spider shoots out of its lair at high speed, overpowers its prey and drags it into the tube where it can be eaten safely.



As well as the unique web, Tube spiders have just six eyes (most British spiders have eight) arranged in two groups of three, forming a rough H-shape. They also hold their legs in a characteristic pattern, with the hind pair angled backwards and the others pointing forwards. Although the adult spiders all have similar dark brown to black **cephalothoraxes** (the front part of the body, equivalent to the head and thorax of insects) the patterns on the abdomen allow them to be distinguished. Adults also differ in size.

The most common and widespread of the three

Segestria species is *S. senoculata*. This is also the smallest of the British Tube spiders, with head and body lengths of males, 6-9 mm and females, 7-10 mm. The abdomen is pale beige/grey with a dark brown, lobed central band (similar to the dark pattern on an adder) and the legs brown with darker bands. It can be found under stones, in holes in walls and under tree bark:



Photo: N R Hunt

The second most common Segestria species is *S. florentina*. This is by far the largest of the three when mature, with males reaching 10-15 mm and females a whopping 13-22 mm. In females the jaws are a spectacular iridescent green while in males they are often slightly more bronze. Adult females may not have a distinctive pattern on their abdomen but males and juveniles might be confused with *S. bavarica*. The legs are dark brown. This spider is usually found in holes in walls, sometimes of quite new buildings. It was once restricted to market towns and ports, so it may originally have been brought to Britain by trading ships.





Segestria senoculata
(female), showing the
radiating web strands that
act as 'trip wires'

Photo: Richard Gallon

The final species, *S. bavarica*, is the rarest. It is slightly larger than *S. senoculata* (males, 9-11 mm; females, 10-13 mm) and with a similar abdominal pattern. However the centres of the dark lobes are usually pale in colour and the sides mottled. In Britain, at least, this species mostly occurs in cracks in coastal cliffs and is only occasionally found in walls.

Because Tube spiders are very sensitive to their 'tripwires' being touched, they can easily be tricked to come out of their retreats with a tuning fork or an electric toothbrush (see Bug Club Magazine Jan/Feb 2014, p. 12).



A female *Segestria florentina*, showing her iridescent green fangs and six eyes

Photo: Peter Harvey

They emerge very fast so if you try this, be warned! *Segestria florentina* has jaws large enough to puncture human skin, so do not stick your finger anywhere near the spider or its tube!

What's in a name?

Segestria means 'a covering or wrapper', perhaps referring to the silk tube.

Senoculata means 'six eyes'.

Bavarica means 'Bavaria', and **Florentina** means 'Florence', and refer to the places the species were first recorded from.



Photo: Mike George

Left:
*Segestria
florentina*, female

Below:
*Segestria
florentina*, male

(The female is
larger: these
photos are at
different scales)



Photo: Debbie Allen



S.



Segestria bavarica



Photo: Richard Gallon



senoculata



S. bavarica



S. florentina

Left:
maps showing
where different
Segestria species
may be found

Geoff