



Facts about False Widows

by Rory Dimond



False widows *Steatoda* spp. are perhaps the UK's most demonised spiders. Alarming headlines about their terrible bites and aggression. Fortunately, these fearful articles about False widows are false!



A typical view of a *Steatoda nobilis* female
Photo ©Geoff Oxford



With a bulbous, glossy abdomen and slender, tapering legs, false widows look similar to Widow spiders *Latrodectus* spp. (such as the infamous Black widows) which is how they got their common name. This is a family resemblance, as both are in the comb-footed spider family (Theridiidae), which are named for the row of serrated bristles on their rear legs.

Three species of False widow are commonly found in Britain, both in the home and outside. The dumpy little **Rabbit hutch spider** *Steatoda bipunctata*, the bigger and darker **Cupboard spider** *Steatoda grossa* and the striking **Noble false widow** *Steatoda nobilis*. The ID guide on the next page should help to identify them, but all can vary in colour and it takes some experience to separate the species.

The Noble false widow is most often blamed for biting. Although they may be the most venomous British spider, their bite is no worse than a bee sting. In extreme cases, it can cause swelling or make you ill. Scare stories about horrible wounds are from nasty infections with bacteria, which aren't caused by spider bites – they can take hold in any wound that is not kept clean.

Funnily enough, the spider that bites Peter Parker in the 2002 Spider Man movie is a painted *S. grossa*, but sadly they won't really give you spidey superpowers either! Real false widow bites are unlikely since their main defences are hiding or playing dead. Hardly terrifying, but it's still best not to handle them.

False widows build a criss-cross web in sheltered places, such as tree holes, logs, outbuildings, on fences or





behind furniture. They can often be spotted hanging upside-down from the web. When prey blunders into the strands, the spider runs out and rapidly wraps it, using its 'comb-feet' to draw reams of silk from its spinnerets and fling it over the victim. The spider then repeatedly bites and wraps the prey until it perishes. False widows can tackle surprisingly large invertebrates in this way, such as bumblebees and house spiders. One Noble false widow was even found eating a baby lizard.

False widow ID Guide

Rabbit Hutch spider, *Steatoda bipunctata*.

Up to 7mm • Dumpy body • Stripy legs • Chestnut abdomen often split with a pale stripe down the middle



S. bipunctata - female
Photo © P.R.Harvey

Cupboard spider, *Steatoda grossa*

Up to 10mm • Long, thin legs without stripes; pale to dark brown • Pale chevrons along abdomen (though adult females appear completely dark)



Noble false widow, *Steatoda nobilis*

Up to 11mm • Leg colour ranging from bright orange to red-brown in adults (paler when young) • Abstract splodge mark on abdomen (sometimes likened to a skull); adult females can be completely dark





Adult male False widows wander from their webs to find a mate. He will court her by vibrating his body and even making sounds by 'stridulating' (scraping ridges on his abdomen against a file on his carapace – a little like a cricket rubbing its wings together). Sometimes a male will live with a young female until she is ready to mate, even 'cuddling up' to her. The female stores sperm in her body, and so can lay several egg clutches from one mating. *Steatoda grossa* often have webs festooned with egg sacs, like discarded cotton wool balls.



**A male Noble false widow cohabits with
a young female**
Photo © Mandy Powell

The tiny spiderlings hatch and moult inside the egg sac, before dispersing en-masse, making bridges of silk from the mother's web. Those that settle indoors are useful controllers of small house pests, such as clothes moths, carpet beetles and fungus gnats. If they are lucky enough to reach adulthood, the females can live for several years, but males only survive for one.



A Noble false widow mother with her spiderlings newly emerged from the egg sac.
Photo © Geoff Oxford

Torchlight Spider Safari

False widows tend to be hidden away unnoticed during the day. At night they become much more obvious as they venture out onto their webs, spinning more threads or waiting for prey. Go out after dark with a torch and look around your garden. If you don't have a garden, try looking on the outside wall of your house or another building on your street (take an adult if you're going out).





A wooden fence or stone wall is ideal, especially one covered in ivy. Move along the fence or wall and see how many False widows you can count and identify. You may be surprised just how many there are in a small space.

In autumn, you may see the slimmer males with their swollen pedipalps. You will probably see other spider species too.

A red light is best as it doesn't disturb the spiders. You can buy torches and headtorches with red light, or make your own by strapping a red cellophane sweet wrapper to your torch with a rubber band. Try to take photos in white light for reference. If you have access to Twitter you can tweet your photos to @BritishSpiders to confirm your identifications. Have fun searching for Steatoda!

Rory



The true bug *Leptoglossus occidentalis*, in Jacqueline's garden.