

Daddy-longlegs spider

(*Pholcus phalangioides*)



Advancing Arachnology

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Daddy-longlegs spider
(*Pholcus phalangioides*)

This long-legged spider has become a familiar sight in homes throughout Britain, expanding its range rapidly from southern England over the last few decades.

Daddy-longlegs spiders are sometimes confused with two other groups of long-legged invertebrates, which are also referred to as 'Daddy-longlegs'. These are the harvestmen (which also have eight legs but appear to have one body section, unlike spiders which have two) and craneflies (insects with six legs, three body sections and a pair of long wings). Of these, only the Daddy-longlegs spider builds a silk web and regularly inhabits houses.

Identification

There are only two spider species likely to be confused with the Daddy-longlegs spider. One, *Psilochorus simoni*, is usually found in wine cellars and is uncommon but widespread; the other, *Holocnemus pluchei*, has been recorded just four times in Britain.

Life history

Adults of both sexes can be found in all months and can breed all year round, probably because they occupy a habitat protected from extreme temperatures. Although the adult males tend to be only slightly smaller than the females, they can be recognised by their clubbed palps – the short leg-like appendages either side of the jaws. Mating takes place in the web: each female can mate with several males. The first egg sac

is produced about 60 days after mating, although this can vary a lot with food supply and temperature. At least six egg sacs can result from a single mating. The eggs are produced in a bundle of about 50, loosely wrapped in a few strands of silk and carried around in the mother's jaws. During this period she occasionally 'parks' her egg sac in the web in order to feed. The development of the spiderlings can be followed through the egg walls. After about two to three weeks, again depending on temperature, the young emerge. The mother helps this process by removing the silk strands that hold the egg sac together. The young stay in their mother's web for several days and then gradually disperse; they mature over the next five to six months.

Webs, food and feeding

The web of the Daddy-longlegs spider is an untidy tangle of non-sticky silk in which the spider usually hangs upside down. These webs are frequently found on ceilings in the corners of rooms or in little-used cupboards and can be very large. One was reported as covering a square metre of ceiling! These spiders are opportunist predators and take whatever prey comes their way - including other spiders. A study of Daddy-longlegs spiders in a Hampshire garden shed between May and September found that, of the remains of 102 prey items removed from the webs, 63 were of the Common House spider (*Tegenaria domestica*), six were other

FACT FILE

Daddy-longlegs or Cellar spider
(*Pholcus phalangoides*)

Body length:

males, 7–10 mm; females, 8–10 mm.

Appearance:

- Cephalothorax (front section of body) – almost circular, pale yellow-brown with a dark patch in the centre
- Abdomen (back section) – cylindrical, greyish with irregular darker patches

- Legs – colour as cephalothorax, with dark joints. First pair of legs approximately five times the length of the body.

Habitat:

In the corners of rooms or cellars, in cupboards or behind furniture. In the south of England the species may persist out-of-doors.

Female Daddy-longlegs spider with egg sac

Inset: emerging young



Geoff Oxford

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Daddy-longlegs spiders, and the rest were unidentifiable spider remains. Other prey includes woodlice and a wide variety of flying insects. Daddy-longlegs spiders have even been recorded eating the much sturdier and considerably heavier large house spiders (*Eratigena saeva* and *E. duellica*), and may be responsible for the decline of these species in some places. They tackle large and potentially dangerous prey items by using their very long legs to throw silk over the victim while keeping out of range. Once the prey is trussed, the Daddy-longlegs spider can move in and bite it. This species presents absolutely no danger to humans or to pets.

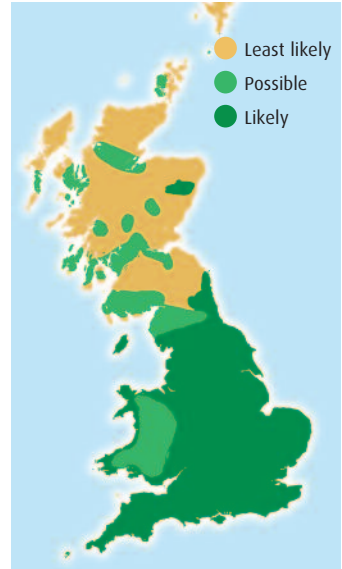
Behaviour

One of the characteristics of Daddy-longlegs spiders (and also of the two other spider species with which it can be confused – see above) is that when disturbed, for example by being poked with a finger, they vibrate so rapidly in their web that they become a blur. Some orb-web weaving species (e.g. the Garden spider, *Araneus diadematus*) behave in a similar way but, whereas they shake from side to side, Daddy-longlegs spiders vibrate in a much more vigorous circular motion. This behaviour is likely to help protect the spider by confusing its predators.

Where are they?

The Daddy-longlegs spider is now a cosmopolitan species, which has been spread around the world by humans. It originated in the sub-tropics and as a consequence can't withstand very low temperatures. In Britain a survey in the 1930s found it in houses only in the south of England (Thames estuary to the Bristol Channel and south Wales). Since then it has moved north, probably as a result of almost all houses now being centrally heated and also, perhaps, related to climate change. In the very south of England, these spiders may now be able to survive away from the protection of buildings, as they do further south in mainland Europe.

Unlike many spider species, Daddy-longlegs spiders are so easily recognized from photographs that everyone can help to map their distribution by sending in records – just visit the Spider Recording Scheme website at: britishspiders.org.uk/srs_surveys



Daddy-longlegs spiders in Britain

For more information

britishspiders.org.uk/daddy_long-legs_spider

britishspiders.org.uk/srs/daddy_long-legs_spider

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



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