

The Tube spiders



Advancing Arachnology

richard gallon



Segestria senoculata

There are three species of Tube spider in the British Isles. They build and inhabit silk tubes in crevices in walls and rocks. Silk strands radiating from the mouth of the tube act as trip-wires for unwary prey.

How to recognise a Tube spider

The silk tube, with as many as a dozen radiating single threads, immediately identifies a Tube spider. Several other spider species live in silk-lined tubes in crevices but without the individual radiating threads. In addition to the distinctive tube, our three species of Tube spider all have a characteristic stance with six robust legs pointing forwards and only the two hind legs pointing backwards. All three species are dark brown or almost black, with tubular abdomens, usually marked with a central repeating black pattern. Most spider species have eight eyes but the Tube spiders have just six, arranged in three groups of two forming a rough 'H'. (See the eye pattern in the photograph below)

What's in a name?

Segestria, meaning a covering or wrapper, perhaps refers to the silk tube.

Bavarica (Bavaria) and *florentina* (Florence) show where the species was first recorded.

Senoculata means 'six eyes'.

The three Tube Spider (*Segestria*) species in Britain

When adult, the three species can be separated by their size, habitat and appearance.

Segestria florentina

Body length: males, 10–15 mm;
females, 13–22 mm.

Colour:

Cephalothorax (front section of body) – Dark brown to black. Jaws are a spectacular iridescent green; in males they are slightly bronze. **Abdomen** (back section) – Adult females may lack a distinctive abdominal pattern but males and juveniles resemble *Segestria bavarica*, with which they could be confused.

Legs – Dark brown.

Habitat: Typically found in holes in walls although it also lives under stones.

Average male length
(without legs)



Average
female length



Peter Harvey

Segestria florentina female showing the remarkable green jaws and 'H'-like eye pattern.

Segestria senoculata

Body length: males, 6–9 mm;
females, 7–10 mm.

Colour:

Cephalothorax – Brown with a darker head
Abdomen – Pale beige/grey with a dark brown, lobed central band (similar to the dark pattern on an Adder).

Legs – Brown with darker bands.

Habitat: Occurs under stones, in holes in walls and under tree bark.

Average male
length



Average
female length



Michael George

Segestria florentina female – note the lack of abdominal pattern compared with the male



Debbie Allen

A male *Segestria florentina*



N R Hunt

Catching their prey

The radiating silk threads look like a very simple web but if a web is defined as something that actually holds prey they don't fit the description. The strands merely act as trip wires, alerting the spider to passing prey. It seems possible that simple trip wires represent an early stage in web evolution, leading later to true capture webs, which incorporate sticky or entangling silk.

All three species are mainly nocturnal, lurking deep in their crevices during the day but

moving to the mouth of the tube after dark. Here they wait. If something like a crawling insect or woodlouse touches a trip wire the spider rushes out, grabs it and retreats into the tube all within a split second. Tube spiders have to move fast for the very reason that those trip wires don't trap the prey. It's easy to entice these spiders out by touching one of the trip wires with a tuning fork or a rapidly vibrating electric toothbrush, but this is not for the faint-hearted!

The larger Tube spider species can catch large and potentially dangerous prey, such as wasps. They seize the insect at the front of the abdomen and pull it backwards into the tube, with the dangerous jaws and sting trailing and safely out of harm's way while their venom takes effect.

Segestria florentina is a robust species capable of piercing human skin. The bite is said to be painful but not dangerous. To avoid being bitten - do not stick your fingers anywhere near the spider or its tube!



Segestria bavarica

Richard Gallen

Segestria bavarica

Body length: males, 9–11 mm;
females, 10–13 mm.

Colour:

Cephalothorax – Dark brown to black.

Abdomen – Similar overall pattern to *Segestria senoculata* but darker. The centres of the lobes may be paler in colour, and the sides more mottled.

Legs – Dark brown with indistinct markings.

Habitat: Usually lives in cracks in rocky outcrops and coastal cliffs but may also be found in walls.

Average male length



Average female length



Francis Far-Cox

Life history

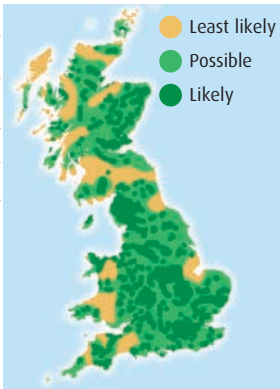
All three species live within their silken tubes although, when mature, males leave their tubes to search for females.

Consequently, unless a female's habitat has been disturbed, any large Tube spiders found wandering are likely to be adult males. After mating, eggs are laid by the female within the tubular retreat; all three species are thought to take two years to reach maturity. Adults are found throughout the year with a peak in spring/summer. Young spiders set up homes of their own, but make much smaller tubes. There is no evidence that Tube spiders can excavate holes so it's a question of finding a place to suit your size!

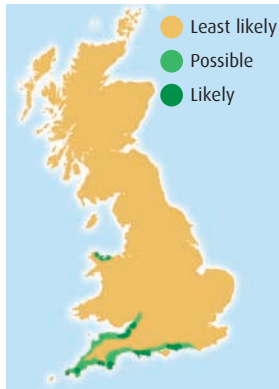
Where are they?

Segestria senoculata is the commonest and smallest of the three species and occurs widely across the British Isles, including on some Scottish islands. *Segestria bavarica* is the rarest of the three and largely restricted to coastal areas of southern England, but with an isolated outpost in North Wales. *Segestria florentina*, another southern species, was once restricted to market towns, and ports, suggesting that it originally colonized Britain via the shipping trade. In recent years it has increased its range, even turning up on quite new buildings. *Segestria senoculata* and *Segestria florentina* can be found on the outside walls of houses though only rarely indoors. The aspect of the wall seems unimportant; they are as likely to be found on the north side of a building as on the south, east or west.

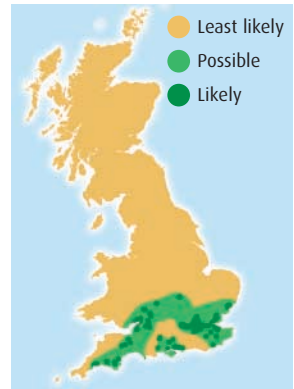
Based on Spider Recording Scheme data 2016



Segestria senoculata



Segestria bavarica



Segestria florentina

Factsheet text by Francis Fair-Cox, Geoff Oxford and Helen Smith, edited by Nicky Rowbottom, designed by Collin Edwards. Graphic Design

For more information

britishspiders.org.uk/srs_segestria_bavarica

britishspiders.org.uk/srs_segestria_florentina

britishspiders.org.uk/srs_segestria_senoculata

The British Arachnological Society

The BAS is Britain's only charity devoted exclusively to spiders and their relatives. We use science and education to advance the wider understanding and appreciation of arachnids, and to promote their conservation.

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