

## False Widow Spiders

False Widow Spiders have raised a lot of interest recently following extensive press coverage.

False widow is the name given to any one of three species that are now very well established in England (particularly the warmer south). Their name derives from the fact that they are commonly mistaken for black widow spiders which are a different species (*Lactrodectus*), but the same family (*Theridiidae*).

The Council does not provide a pest control service to control spiders but local pest control companies maybe able to assist.

### How can I control the problem myself?

Spiders can be captured using a glass (to put over it) and a piece of card (to slide under the glass) then they can be released outside. Alternatively, a vacuum cleaner can be used to remove them from difficult areas. Fly sprays should also be effective in killing them if the other methods are not possible.

### How can I identify False Widow or other types of spiders?

Have a look at the images below or contact the [National History museum](#) or the [British Arachnological Society](#) to see if they can offer further advice or a spider identification service.

### ***Steatoda bipunctata***

(Sometimes known as the "rabbit hutch spider") is usually the smallest of the three and a very common spider of sheds and outbuildings. Its body, which rarely exceeds 7mm in length for mature females and 5mm for males, is dark and shiny with a pattern, when present, comprising a whitish line around the front and sometimes a white stripe down the centre. The impressed dots on the abdomen from which it gets its scientific name are not easily visible with the naked eye.



### Habitat and ecology

This spider is mainly found in and around buildings but also occurs on old

and dead trees where it lives under bark and in the dry litter collected in rot holes and other cavities. In common with others of the genus it preys on crawling invertebrates. The typical scaffold webs include viscid lines that are attached to the substrate under tension. The struggles of the captured insect break the attachment of these lines thus lifting the unfortunate captive into the air and leaving it suspended ready for the spider to deal with. Both sexes are mature throughout the year and females may survive for several years.

### **Steatoda grossa**

*Steatoda grossa* has a body length when mature of around 10mm for adult females and again males are generally smaller. It is variable in appearance, with only juveniles and adult males usually having a pattern and adult females often having none. This spider has become more frequent in the south-east and is probably spreading north.



They are not aggressive, and most injuries to humans are due to defensive bites delivered when a spider gets unintentionally squeezed or pinched. It is possible that some bites may result when a spider mistakes a finger thrust into its web for its normal prey, but ordinarily intrusion by any large creature will cause these spiders to flee.

### **Steatoda nobilis**

The "noble false widow", is the largest of the three with a maximum body length of 14mm for females and 10mm for males.

There have been a number of reports of people being bitten by spiders, and false widows are often the focus of this, particularly in the media. However, it is difficult to obtain accurate evidence as those complaining of bites often do not see the spider but assume they are the culprit because of the absence of a bee or wasp. Alternatively, they only get a brief glimpse. Rarely is the spider captured so that an accurate identification can be carried out.



A false widow spider bite can cause an allergic reaction. The bite has been compared to a wasp sting. In fact, when one considers the undoubtedly large number of people who are stung each year by wasps and bees, the risk of being bitten by a false widow spider must surely be relatively small. False widows are sedentary by nature, remaining in their webs and the males are only likely to wander when they are ready to mate. Being bitten is therefore likely to be the result of putting a hand into a web, handling one roughly or sitting or lying on one by mistake. Reports of bites by false widows are difficult to substantiate and may be exaggerated by the media.

In summary, being bitten by a spider is unlikely in this country in normal circumstances, and the effect of a bite is unlikely to be worse than being stung by a wasp or bee. A more serious problem is only likely to arise in the event of an allergic reaction or if the person is already compromised by other health issues. Nevertheless, if severe swelling or ulceration results from a suspected spider bite it is recommended that you see your doctor immediately or visit an Accident and Emergency Department.