

Ballooning with spiders



About this time last year a friend said he was fishing a few miles off Beachy Head when they were suddenly aware of loads of tiny silk threads arriving on the boat. They were certainly attached to the young of tiny linyphiid spiders – money spiders – going through their autumn dispersal practice of ‘ballooning’. These tiny spiders climb as high as they can, stand on tiptoes, point their abdomen to the sky and release some silk thread. If this doesn’t tangle on something and gets picked up by the breeze, they release and away they go. And they do it in huge numbers. Sometimes, in the early morning sun, you can see fields covered with fine traces of silk, or gossamer as it was originally called when they didn’t know what caused it. But ballooning is a risky business. The spiderlings might find themselves easy prey for birds, such as the swallow; they may get drawn up to extremely high altitudes where they freeze (they have certainly been recorded at about 16,000ft – attached to a weather balloon), or they are quite likely to land on unsuitable habitat, especially lakes or the sea (and they have been recorded over 1,500km from land). The ones that landed on my friend’s boat might have got a lift back to shore, but there must have been huge numbers that just ended up in the sea. On the other hand, it gets them away from mum and has enabled these spiders to colonise remote islands.

The autumn also makes other spiders more obvious, including those around the house. We get two species regularly in the house: one has extremely long thin legs and a small body with a longish abdomen. It’s called *Pholcus phalangioides*. It tends to make an untidy and inconspicuous loose web in a corner of the ceiling, and if disturbed it either shakes or goes into an extraordinary high speed gyration under the web. The other species is the common house spider, *Tegenaria domestica*, which makes a dense sheet web in protected corners at floor level. This species can grow to be one of the largest of European spiders, the male with seemingly longer legs and small body, the female appearing much more robust. I trust that these animals are controlling the carpet moths and mosquitoes that invade the house. Another larger species that sometimes occurs in outbuildings is bristly, with a large, roundish, shiny brown abdomen. This species, *Meta menardii*, is the nearest we have to a cave spider in Britain, and so I am more used to seeing it in the underground sites where I search for bats in the winter. Their

presence can also be detected by their egg sac: a characteristic pouch of silk hanging from the roof.

Outside there are many hundreds of species of spider in Britain, but perhaps the most conspicuous autumn spiders are the large orb-web 'garden spiders' (mostly of the genus *Araneus*) that somehow just suddenly appear on damp autumn mornings when their webs get covered in dew. I assume they have started off as an egg somewhere and do not just appear by spontaneous generation. A spectacular relative of these is the wasp spider, *Argiope bruennichi*, which is up to 15mm long and with bright yellow and black stripes across its abdomen. It also has an orb web, but decorated with a rough zig-zag ribbon of dense silk running across the web. It is usually found very close to the ground; it is surprising scarcely seen, but has been reported locally.

Spiders can be extremely difficult to identify, but they do have a range of fascinating life traits. There is a lot of literature available now, but it is still nice to look back at the earlier works of the likes of W.S. Bristow in his monograph *The Comity of Spiders* (1939/41) or his later *New Naturalist* volume (1958), or even the much earlier work of Jean Henri Fabre in *The Life of Spiders* (1912).

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