



Tales from a
Sisters Naturalist
by Jim Anderson

The false black widow

You’d think after 90 years of living on the great Planet Earth, I’d know a black widow spider when it crawled under my nose.

Nope. I was wrong about the one my wife, Sue, found on our dining room windowsill. I should have noticed a very different red bar across the front of it’s abdomen — and a sort of red circle around its spinneret. Plus you *never* find a real black widow so close to daylight.

Those two red areas on the abdomen should have been a clue for this old and forgetful naturalist, but habit is habit for me, and if it was a black widow at first glance I was not going to question my ID.

But those red marks kept popping up in my mind, and after just writing about the African

invader, the brown widow, well... I said to myself one morning, “Better check...” So I sent my picture off to my dear entomologist pal Eric Eaton in Colorado Springs.

Sure enough, he said right off, “Sorry Jim, that’s not a black widow, that’s a false black widow.” Don’t know what I’d do without that wonderful bug man! You should have a copy of his and Kauffman’s “Insects of North America.”

So let me tell you what I found out about the false black widow, of the genus *Steatoda*, which is *not* in the real black widow genus *Latrodectus*. First of all you’ll ask, “What about

venom?” Yeah, what about venom — are they as dangerous to man as the real black widow?

Yes, but only two of the more than 116 species of this genus found throughout the world have bites which are medically significant in humans, *S. grossa* and *S. nobilis*. The other 114 species are not thought of as medically significant. However, you’ll have to wait from one to 60 hours after being bitten to be sure... and please use a disinfectant to cover the bite/injury area.

Generally speaking, female false widows are not aggressive — it’s the males this time — and both sexes are nocturnal. Most injuries to humans are due to secondary infection from scratching a bite delivered when the spider gets unintentionally squeezed or pinched somehow — like when a sleeping human accidentally rolls over on or drops a hand, arm or leg on the poor unsuspecting creature in the middle of the night.

Many of those 116 species do not have the black widow look-alike features. Yes, the body shape and the web manufacturing is very similar, but its coloring is very different for most species; some have yellow or orange to go with the red markings.

Most false widows prey on other spiders,



PHOTO BY JIM ANDERSON

The infamous false black widow.

smaller arthropods, mice, frogs, small reptiles and amphibians, and in the right place at the right time, on black widows themselves.

There is often hysteria surrounding these spiders, and/or spiders in general. They have unjustly earned a reputation for being a dangerous pest. But most spiders only bite when they feel threatened.

Jan Beccaloni, curator of Arachnida and Myriapoda in the Natural History Museum in England, says, “During my time at the museum I have, not surprisingly, met many people who are scared of spiders. That’s a great pity because spiders are awesome creatures, which are sadly misunderstood. Aside from their key role in feeding on pest insect species, their silk is being developed to make specialist clothing such as

bullet-proof vests and their venom can be used in pain relief.”

So next time you find an unwanted spider in your house, please don’t kill it! Either leave it in peace, or humanely put it out in your shed. Or the back of your clothes closet. They will eat those little beasties that eat your clothing.

Even if it’s a real black widow you come into contact with, put it outside in the back of the garage, or tool shed, and remember it’s there. Spiders can live in relative harmony with us — they’re even tidy houseguests, helping to keep the place clear of flying insects and other pesky invertebrates. And if you have a tree frog spending the winter under your house, well, they also eat spiders and unwanted insects.



PHOTO BY JIM ANDERSON

The real female black widow spider.

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