Synanthropic is best: Nuctenea umbratica (Araneae: Araneidae) and Steatoda bipunctata (Araneae: Theridiidae) are the European Spiders of the Years 2017 and 2018

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Synanthropic is best: *Nuctenea umbratica* (Araneae: Araneidae) and *Steatoda bipunctata* (Araneae: Theridiidae) are the European Spiders of the Years 2017 and 2018

Christoph Hörweg & Milan Řezáč

Abstract. The European spiders of the year 2017, *Nuctenea umbratica* (Clerck, 1757), and 2018, *Steatoda bipunctata* (Linnaeus, 1758), are presented. Both species were originally bark-dwellers, but became more and more synanthropic. Their appearance and characteristics (e.g., ecology, habitat, phenotype) are briefly described. The modality of the voting is given as well as the decisive criteria for the win.

Keywords: bark-dweller, Europe, popular, Rabbit Hutch Spider, synanthropic, Walnut Orb-weaver Spider

Synanthropic spiders – sometimes just called ‘house spiders’ – are feared and loved at the same time. However, this is perfect for a spider of the year! After *Pholcus phalangioides* (Fuesslin, 1775) in 2003, *Salticus scenicus* (Clerck, 1757) in 2005 and *Eratigena atrica* (C.L. Koch, 1843) in 2008 (Kreuels & Jäger 2003, Jäger & Kreuels 2005, Jäger 2007), two more similar species were elected. Both of them took advantage of new microhabitats available in homes and around houses in urbanized areas and were able to settle into human dwellings (Sacher, 1983, Reinke 1997, Jocqué et al. 2016). Moreover, they share another habit: they are also bark-dwellers (Wunderlich 1982, Koponen 1996, Horváth & Szentér 2002, Szentér & Horváth 2006, Machač & Tuf 2016). This means looking under the bark of trees near houses may reveal a spider of the year!

Election of the European Spider of the Year (ESY)
The European Spider of the Year was chosen by 81 (2017) respectively 83 (2018) arachnologists from 26 European countries (Albania, Austria, Belgium, Bulgaria, Croatia, Czechia, Denmark, Finland, France, Germany, Great Britain, Hungary, Ireland, Italy, Liechtenstein, Macedonia, The Netherlands, Norway, Poland, Portugal, Serbia, Slovakia, Slovenia, Spain, Sweden, Switzerland). Co-ordination is via the Natural History Museum Vienna together with the “Arachnologische Gesellschaft” (AraGes) and the European Society of Arachnology (ESA). It is a simple email vote: voting members choose their favourite spider out of six proposed species (partly genera). A majority wins!

Through choosing the Spider of the Year we not only hope that this less popular group of animals will be brought to the fore, but we also hope that researchers can obtain new data about its current distribution. In this context, enjoy the Spider of the Year and help us with your locality records via photographic documentation of this species.

There are many societies supporting the Spider of the Year (see European Society of Arachnology 2018). Furthermore, every arachnologist is asked for support using those spider species as a ‘model’ to promote spiders in general (for more details see Hörweg et al. 2015).
in nooks and crevices (Komposch 1993) (Fig. 4). In some habitats it can be encountered quite frequently and in Central Europe the species is categorised as not threatened (Řezáč et al. 2015, Blick et al. 2016). The known distribution in Europe can be found in specific distribution maps (Helsdingen 2017, Arachnologische Gesellschaft 2018, CSCF 2018, Czech Arachnological Society 2018, European Society of Arachnology 2018, MNHN 2018).

*Nuctenea umbratica* can be mistaken for dark animals like *Larinioides ixobolus* (Thorell, 1873), but for comparison this species is a metallic black and the foliation is lighter and more prominent. Juveniles of *N. umbratica* resemble the smaller (body length up to 9 mm), but much rarer, *Nuctenea silvicultrix* (C.L. Koch, 1835). This species is distributed more to the east and differs by having lighter sides of the body and a more rounded opisthosoma (Nentwig et al. 2018, Wiki AraGes 2018).

*Nuctenea umbratica* was chosen as the European Spider of the Year because (1) the species is quite common, (2) despite its hidden way of life it is easy to find close to houses, (3) it is a quite prominent and easy to identify species, and (4) it raises public awareness about its original habitat on the bark of dead wood and/or old trees.

*Steatoda bipunctata* (Linnaeus, 1758)/Rabbit Hutch Spider/Fettspinne/stéatode à deux points – Spider of the year 2018

*Steatoda bipunctata* belongs to the cobweb spider family (= comb-footed spiders, Theridiidae). Worldwide, this family has 2487 species of which 228 live in Europe (Nentwig et al. 2018, World Spider Catalog 2018). The genus *Steatoda* is represented by 13 species in Europe, six of which can be found in Central Europe (Blick et al. 2004, Nentwig et al. 2018).

The body length is 4.5–7 mm in females and 4–5.5 mm in males. The body appears greasy or waxy and shiny, especially the slightly flattened opisthosoma. In German it is called “Fettspinne” (Fat or Greasy Spider). The basic colour of the prosoma is brown to almost black, the opisthosoma is generally light brown becoming dark brown to black towards the edges. A rather indistinct lighter stripe runs down the middle of the opisthosoma, as well as a wide pale band across the front (Fig. 5). Usually four small dark dots can be seen (these mark the points where muscles attach inside the body). The
legs are red-brown with darker rings (Reichholf & Steinbach 1997, Bellmann 2016, Bee et al. 2017). As the name implies, rabbit hutches often make a suitable habitat as well. However, they are also found outdoors, mostly in gardens, on bushes and in forests – especially under tree bark – in rock crevices or under stones (Szentár & Horváth 2006, Machač & Tuf 2016). In places they can be quite common and the species is not regarded as endangered (Řezáč et al. 2015, Blick et al. 2016). The known distribution in Europe can be found in specific distribution maps (Helsdingen 2017, Arachnologische Gesellschaft 2018, CSCF 2018, Czech Arachnological Society 2018, European Society of Arachnology 2018, MNHN 2018).

Steatoda bipunctata can be mistaken for Steatoda castanea (Clerck, 1757), a species which lives in similar habitats but which mostly has a lighter colouration and is only found in spring (Nentwig et al. 2018, Wiki AraGes 2018).

Steatoda bipunctata was chosen as the European Spider of the Year because this species is commonly found in houses and is relatively easy to recognize. Furthermore, it is an example of a cobweb spider which is not dangerous, unlike the widow spiders from the Mediterranean which are venomous to people and which are rightly feared and regularly mentioned in the popular media; the chirping of the males is another peculiarity of the species.

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