

False widows, false fear!



Image © Neil Manito bit.ly/2yg5C0o

Oh dear. Hilarious and shocking news is doing the rounds this week, as misinformed teachers panic and close four London schools amid irrational fears about spiders.

Children will lose up to three weeks of education whilst pest control teams rake in the cash by dousing the schools in potentially harmful pesticides, to relieve the schools of their false fears.

As I pointed out on Twitter, it might be cheaper and a lot better to hire a natural history educator than to pay a pest control firm? If only schools ran a GCSE in natural history, as many campaigners have been calling for in a petition, then these spiders would have been welcomed as a wonderful learning opportunity instead. What a sorry state we are in when people know so little about our local wildlife that schools react like this.

Let's be clear: none of Britain's wild spiders are genuinely dangerous. Overuse of pesticides is more

harmful. As the Natural History Museum points out in this helpful article:

www.nhm.ac.uk/discover/news/2017/december/how-dangerous-are-false-widow-spiders.html

Only 12 of Britain's 650+ wild spider species have ever been known to bite humans, none are aggressive, all have to be provoked before they will bite, none deliver pain any worse than a wasp sting, none have symptoms more serious than that.

The school closures prompted conservation charity Buglife to issue a statement, to try to dismiss fears. They pointed out that most British spiders could not bite you even if they tried, because their fangs are too small or weak to be able to penetrate human skin. Even if one of the larger spiders does manage to bite you, after being provoked, the symptoms are brief and milder than a wasp or bee sting.

The noble false-widow *Steotoda nobilis*, found in the closed London schools, but also living all over the place without anyone needing to worry, does have a more venomous bite and injects a neurotoxin which may cause localised pain, minor swelling, and in extreme cases brief nausea for a few hours. But here are the 'however's'...

* Buglife spokesman Paul Hetherington points out that whilst an allergic reaction to a spider bite is theoretically possible, this has never been recorded, even in people who are allergic to bee or wasp stings.

* There is no proven link between spider bites and bacterial infection and there are still no confirmed cases of serious injury resulting directly from the bite of a native spider in Britain.

* There are no proven cases where the noble false-widow has caused death, coma or permanent injury.

Paul said: "The hysteria growing around false widow spiders has fed underlying public fears of arachnids leading to mass misidentification and the persecution of many common house and garden species."

Noble false-widow spiders are shy, mostly nocturnal, sluggish, solitary and non-aggressive, and mostly hide in crevices during school hours - they don't run about on children's school desks. I wonder if the pest control teams pointed out these facts to the school staff? Money to be made.

When I pointed out these details on social media, one person suggested it was best if I 'stay childless for the sake of the children.'! And apparently if I had ever been in a room with spiders I would surely know the dangers.

Actually, my children love spiders and I take my enthusiasm for wild things into school sessions, where the excitement from pupils is a delight to share.

My kids often - fearlessly - highlight spiders they find in our house and garden, with joy and curiosity. They also walk around the house on occasion with pet snails sitting on their arms, and they keep pet meal worms, woodlice, ants, caterpillars, earthworms and more besides; all well cared for and eventually released again unharmed. As a result of their interest in nature, they respect all wildlife and sometimes tell me they wish more of us grown-ups would too.

The great hypocrisy is that schools take this hysterical, costly, destructive, demonising and toxic approach to a virtually harmless spider, shutting schools, yet they are

generally quick to chastise and fine parents for child absenteeism; for removing children from school for family holidays where they might discover a bit more nature than they ever do in school.

And we witness a draconian frowning upon genuine illness, whereupon parents are sent an annual report on how many times their kids weren't well enough to come in, publicly rewarding all those children who manage 100% attendance, as if somehow being ill is a choice. But spiders? Close the schools.

Here is the silly spider story in the Guardian:
www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2018/oct/04/false-widow-spider-infestations-close-four-east-london-schools

* Please look out for my pending article on spider love, to be published in South Bristol Voice, out shortly.

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I write about, teach and do ecology.
New book coming soon 😊