

Canal Spiders *Larinioides sclopetarius* in Kidderminster

Rosemary Winnall



01. Kidderminster Lock and St Mary's Church. Rosemary Winnall.

There is a wealth of interest to ponder whilst walking 400m into Kidderminster along the canal from Sainsbury's car park. There may be a Mute Swan or two paddling between the colourful narrowboats, a Moorhen skulking in the waterside vegetation or even something much more surprising like the juvenile Great Northern Diver seen here in December 2019. Pausing at the aqueduct to look over into the River Stour one can check for fish if the water is clear, and Otter prints if sand is exposed.

Kidderminster Lock stands below the impressive Grade 1 listed Church of St Mary's and All Saints (01) featured in *Betjeman's Best British Churches* (Betjeman & Surman 2011), the earliest part being the chancel, consecrated in 1315. Richard Baxter, in white marble, stands close by, his 1875 statue recently restored and his broken thumb repaired. What was once the town's busiest wharf is now landscaped and the old stables and storage buildings long gone. Only a single old lifting crane remains to remind us of past industry.

One can cross the canal carefully on the narrow plank attached to the upper lock gate or venture to the far end of the lock and cross the bridge there. This is an interesting split bridge (02), specially designed so that the boat's towline could be transferred easily when the horse had to cross from one side of the canal to the other.

To follow the canal, you move down the steep concrete towpath to drop down under the Kidderminster bypass, entering the lit walkway

where the 12 light fittings are bedecked with spiders' webs (03). This is what I had come to photograph. I'd noticed these before but today I'd remembered to bring my camera. The evening before had been very warm and several moths had been attracted to the 24-hour lights. I identified one Old Lady, four Red Underwings and a Common Swift perched on the wall graffiti. Another Red Underwing had fed spiders overnight (04).



02. Split Bridge, Kidderminster Lock. Rosemary Winnall.



03. Spiders' webs, Kidderminster bypass bridge. Rosemary Winnall.



04. Spiders and Red Underwing moth. Rosemary Winnall.

It was these spiders that I had come to see and I needed photographs to confirm their identity. I could only find females on this occasion, and they were all poised in their oddly shaped orb-webs which seemed intermingled due to the density of spiders. There were a lot and I could easily count 50 in a short distance and there must have been many more. Their colours ranged from pale to quite dark with many white hairs giving them a furry appearance. I couldn't find a male, so I returned on 21 September 2021, this time with a small stool to help me get better close-up photographs. I found the males easily on this occasion and was able to admire their handsome features. I identified them as Bridge Orb-web Spiders *Larinioides sclopetarius*, and I am grateful to John Partridge for confirming the identification. These are relatively large spiders, with females (05) measuring up to 14mm and males (06) to 9mm. They are nocturnal predators and are only rarely found on vegetation, preferring to live on man-made structures close to water, often in large numbers (Bee, Oxford & Smith 2017). Their main food appears to be Chironomid flies. We are right on the edge of their range in north Worcestershire, but they may be spreading and it is worth looking out for this species in similar habitats.



05. *Larinioides sclopetarius* female. Rosemary Winnall.



06. *Larinioides sclopetarius* male. Rosemary Winnall.

The next 100m beyond the canal tunnel continues to be of interest and there are many plants growing with a foothold in nooks and crannies in canal-side structures. One may find Beggarticks *Bidens frondosa*, Skullcap *Scutellaria galericulata*, Meadowsweet *Filipendula ulmaria*, Hart's-tongue Fern *Asplenium scolopendrium*, Pellitory-of-the-Wall *Parietaria judaica*, Elder *Sambucus nigra*, and the ubiquitous Butterfly-bush *Buddleia davidii*. The tall Slingfield Mill chimney (owned by Brinton's Carpets until the 1980s) dominates the horizon and a Peregrine Falcon might, if you are lucky, be seen perched on a high ledge, or swooping down towards the flock of feral pigeons.

Some weeks later I met a lady coming up out of the tunnel, and without prompting, she stopped and said with concern, "Do you know, someone has cleaned the spiders' webs from the lights in that tunnel, I used to like to see them there!". But days later the webs were back, so a few of the spiders must have thankfully missed the clean up!

References

- Bee, L., Oxford, G. & Smith, Helen. 2017. *Britain's Spiders. A Field Guide*. Wild Guides Ltd. Hampshire.
 Betjeman, J. & Surman, R. 2011. *Betjeman's Best British Churches (updated)*. Harper Collins, Glasgow.

Images

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