

Photographing spiders in autumn

In the UK, autumn is known as spider season, because as the nights darken and temperatures drop, our eight-legged friends become increasingly visible. Andrew McCarthy shares his tips for shooting great arachnid images



Late summer is the time of year when the focus of my macro work begins to turn towards spiders. Although these eight-legged arthropods (not to be confused with insects) can be found and photographed throughout much of the summer, they are particularly prominent after the equinox, when cooler nights bring early morning dew that creates spectacular back-lit scenes against the beautiful autumn colour palate. It is also a time of year when many other invertebrates have reached the end of their breeding cycles and are either difficult to find or look tatty and unphotogenic, so spiders provide a welcome end of season bonus for the avid macro photographer.

Above Female nursery web spider on dahlia head. Canon EOS 5D MkIV with 180mm macro lens, ISO 800, 1/200sec at f/7.1, tripod, stack of 40 images

Spiders can be found in virtually all terrestrial (and some aquatic) habitats, but for our photography purposes, gardens, grasslands and heaths are good starting points.

In summer, look out for flower crab spiders in the garden – these beautifully camouflaged critters sit patiently in flower heads with their front legs outstretched, waiting to grab a passing insect. Scan low vegetation and garden shrubs for nursery web spiders. Later in summer, the females can be seen in the vicinity of their large webs, guarding their egg sacks. Also in summer, the funnel-shaped webs of labyrinth spiders can be seen on heathlands. The webs are more prominent in late summer, when females reach an impressive size, and their funnel entrances

are full of the decaying remnants of previous meals. On a cool, clear morning in autumn – particularly in grassland and scrub – the low sun will reveal multiple dew-covered webs of orb-weaver (*Araneus sp*) spiders, illuminated by the early morning light.

Like most invertebrates, spider populations are declining due to habitat loss and other human-related pressures, so garden with nature in mind if you can. A wildlife garden provides photo opportunities too. Three years ago I created a wildflower meadow in my garden, which is now the starting point for much of my invertebrate photography. The variety of native plants here (together with some non-natives) provides structural variety in which spiders can spin webs and the flowers help attract small insects on which spiders rely for food.

SHOOTING TECHNIQUES

Spiders tend to be fairly (or in some cases very) small, so my favoured lens is a longish focal-length macro lens, such as the OM System 90mm f/3.5, coupled with a light tripod (I use a small Peak Design travel type) for stability and to aid precise composition.

Spiders have characteristics that can make them more challenging to photograph in close-up than some other invertebrates, as anyone who has tried to take a macro image of an orb-weaver spider in a web on a windy day will testify. The often large area and fine detail of the webs (many of which are highly photogenic in their own right) can be difficult to capture unless stacking techniques are used, and then any wind movement can make things tricky, as a plump spider in the centre of a web is likely to be highly susceptible to movement in even the lightest breeze. As predators, spiders also tend to be remarkably easy to disturb, especially when it is warm. They will quickly move away if your approach is clumsy.

My starting point these days is to stack most spider images, as in optimal weather conditions this technique allows me to obtain sufficient depth of field to capture the whole spider in focus together with selected parts of the environment (such as the web) to control



the narrative and tell a story wherever possible. My camera of choice is the OM System OM-1 MkII, which has a stacking mode allowing up to 15 images, with an in-camera Jpeg frame being produced at the end of each stack.

If I need more images in a stack (to enable a greater depth of field), the camera has a focus-bracketing function where up to 999

Above Orb-weaver spider. OM System OM-1 MkII with 90mm macro lens, ISO 800, 1/640sec at f/4.5, tripod, stack of 15 images

Below Oplionid on wild carrot flower head. OM-1 MkII with 60mm macro lens, ISO 640, 1/400sec at f/4.5, tripod, stack of 25 images



LEARNING ZONE



Left Nursery web spider in heathland.
OM System OM-1 MkII with 60mm macro lens, ISO 400, 1/800sec at f/4.5, tripod, stack of 25 images

Below Pholcus on web.
OM System OM-1 MkII with 60mm macro lens, ISO 1000, 1/800sec at f/4.5, tripod

On zero-wind days, I might choose to get in closer, shoot with a higher number of frames and go for a greater depth of field. Regardless, I always watch through the viewfinder for any wind movement before pressing the shutter button.

If your camera doesn't have a stacking function, there are several options. The first is the simplest: shoot single frames with a small aperture (such as f/16) to maximise depth of field and shoot from slightly further back if you need more (cropping in post-production if needed). Alternatively, choose a wide aperture and get creative. If you do need more depth of field, it is possible to stack by hand on still days – ensure a point just in front of the subject is in focus then move through the subject in slices by turning the barrel of the lens a tiny amount before each frame. It can take several attempts to get manual stacks right, but in optimal

Raw frames can be taken for later processing in post-production using stacking software.

The number of images I take on each occasion is to some extent a creative decision and can depend on the focal length of the lens, distance to subject and my aspirations for the shot. For example,

whether I want a shallow or deep depth of field or whether there is any wind movement to cause potential image alignment problems.

While I would ideally choose a light or zero-wind day for stacking, if there is any breeze I select a smaller number of frames and adapt composition accordingly.



Orb-weaver against colourful blooms in garden flowerbed.
OM System OM-1 MkII with 90mm macro lens, ISO 250, 1/640sec at f/4.5, tripod, stack of 20 images

LEARNING ZONE

weather, it can be a useful technique for those without the latest in-camera technology.

Regardless of the method used, check the accuracy of each stack before you move on. Run through the sequence of images on the back of the camera to ensure the frames line up and run as many stacks as you need to get a perfect sequence. A good tip is to programme a button on the back of the camera to add a star to the final image in each stack. Alternatively, shoot a blank frame at the start and end of each run, as this makes it easy to identify the stack sequences when you work on the files later.

If I intend to work on my stacks in post-production rather than producing an in-camera Jpeg, I use stacking software such as Helicon Focus or Zerene Stacker – these are very simple packages to use and have powerful additional capabilities you can explore as your skills develop. There are free stacking options available too, and Photoshop is always a good standby, although in my experience, it doesn't produce results as precise as the purpose-built software.

FIELD CRAFT

Good field skills are vital if you are going to get sufficiently close to use your macro lens effectively with spiders. As ambush predators, they are easily disturbed, so keep low (ideally with vegetation behind you, as spiders will see your silhouette against the sky) and move yourself and your equipment into position very slowly. Be particularly careful when working with web-spinning spiders such as the orb-weavers, as the threads of their webs can extend for several metres and it is very easy to inadvertently damage or destroy webs as you move yourself or your tripod into position, or when you are walking through habitat looking for subjects. Stick to paths wherever possible.

GETTING CREATIVE

Once I have located a potential subject and worked out how I can approach it and set up without causing disturbance, I tend to start by taking a conventional representative image first, using front lighting, with the subject nicely in focus and with a well-controlled background. Only once I'm

confident I have this kind of shot in the bag will I experiment with different lighting scenarios and compositional arrangements, using backlighting or incorporating interesting backgrounds with complementary colours, or unusual tonal gradations.

ADDING NARRATIVE

In addition to the usual arrangement of elements in the frame (rule of thirds, use of leading lines), I also try to add layers of narrative wherever possible, working with unusual lighting, coloured backgrounds, interesting settings or unusual behaviour. In general, the more layers of interest an image has, the greater the likelihood a viewer will find a shot compelling. That is not to say there is no place for representative portrait-style images – it's just a tip to always be on the lookout for the unusual. For example, search for subjects with prey or eggs and include interactions between species where possible (such as predation). Adding layers of interest will definitely make your images much more compelling.



Above Cross spider with damselfly prey. OM System OM-1 MkII with 60mm macro lens, ISO 800, 1/250sec at f/4.5, tripod, stack of 20 images

Opposite (top) Labyrinth spider in dew-covered funnel web, with red ant prey. OM System OM-1 MkII with 60mm macro lens, ISO 1250, 1/500sec at f/7.1, tripod

Opposite (below) Flower crab spider. OM System OM-1 MkII with 60mm macro lens, ISO 400, 1/200sec at f/5.6, tripod, stack of 30 images





Orb-weaver spider with hoverfly prey.
 OM System OM-1 MkII with 60mm macro lens, ISO 1000, 1/100sec at f/4, tripod, stack of 25 images

10 TIPS FOR AUTUMN SPIDER SUCCESS

1 Invertebrate populations are in decline, so gardening with nature in mind is a wonderful way of helping these creatures, as well as providing you with photo opportunities. Even a small wildflower meadow can help – a mix of low and tall flowering plants provide structure for web-spinning species, and native plants attract small insects that the spiders need for food.

2 Spiders in webs are likely to be susceptible to movement in the wind. Use as fast a shutter speed as is practical unless there is no wind. If stacking, ideally choose a light-wind day or wait carefully for a lull in the breeze before you press the shutter.

3 Whether shooting at home or at a local nature reserve, get up early to make the most of lighter winds and

spectacular dew-covered webs that often prevail in autumn.

4 Good field skills are vital if you are going to get sufficiently close to use a macro lens effectively. Spiders tend to be ambush predators and are easily disturbed, so keep low and move yourself and your equipment into position very slowly.

5 Be especially careful when working with web-spinning species – web threads can extend for a considerable distance, so it is easy to inadvertently damage or destroy them as you move into position. Download the RPS nature photographer's code at rps.org/media/1xcnsuga/the-nature-photographers-code-of-practice.pdf.

6 Experiment with lighting and composition. Use front

and backlighting and look out for subjects where you can position yourself to include interesting out of focus backgrounds, with complementary colours or unusual tone gradations.

7 Search for subjects with prey or eggs. Including interactions between species (as well as behavioural aspects) to an image adds another layer of interest and will make your images more compelling.

8 Think carefully about setting – a cluttered background (which is common when shooting in dense vegetation) needs careful handling if it is not going to spoil the final image. Stacking can help, as it allows use of a shallow depth of field, enabling you to render the background nicely out of focus and giving the image more punch.

9 Choose your viewpoint carefully. As with any wildlife photography, the camera position will make or break an image. In general, shooting at eye level (or even slightly lower) will help your viewer engage much more effectively with the subject.

10 If stacking, run through the images on the back of the camera before moving on to the next sequence to check shots are aligned. If not, reshoot it. Run as many as you need to get that perfect sequence, either in-camera or for later post-processing. Mark the end of each stack sequence either by shooting a single shot against a blank subject or by programming a button to mark the last image with a star. This enables you to ID stack sequences easily at the post-processing stage.

Andrew McCarthy is a wildlife photographer based in Exeter, with a particular interest in invertebrate macro photography. He is a brand ambassador for OM System, holds a fellowship with the RPS and sits on its Associate/Fellowship distinctions awards panel. See more of his work at andrewmccarthyphotography.co.uk.