

Figure 2. *Leiobunum* sp. aggregation.
Photograph © Paul Ewings



Figure 3. *Leiobunum* sp.
Photograph © Paul Ewings

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Identification of females of British *Oedothorax* species

There are five British species of *Oedothorax*, four of which are among the most widespread and frequent spiders in our fauna. Identifying male specimens, using the form of the modified carapace and the tibial apophysis of the palp, presents few problems. By contrast, distinguishing the females requires very meticulous examination of the epigynes which closely resemble one another. This is particularly important when females are collected in the absence of males or, as is frequently the case, when more than one species of the genus is found together in the same habitat.

Oedothorax gibbosus

Perhaps the most distinctive species is *Oedothorax gibbosus* in which the central plate of the epigyne is almost triangular in shape with the dark lines on either side of the central area converging anteriorly to a greater degree than in the other four species (Fig. 1).

Habitats. *O. gibbosus* is found in wetland habitats, including marshes, bogs, fens, wet meadows and damp grasslands among others. It is common and widespread throughout Britain and peak adult activity is in mid-summer from May to August.

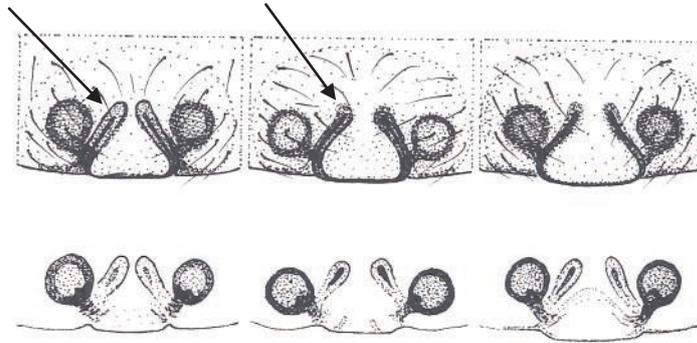


Figure 1. Upper row, epigynes of *Oedothorax gibbosus* viewed ventrally.
Lower row, cleared internal structures of the epigyne.

Oedothorax retusus

Females of this species are sometimes confused with those of *O. gibbosus*. The epigyne has the lateral borders somewhat converging anteriorly but they are less so than those of *O. gibbosus* and are more curved. They also have a pair of minute circular structures which are normally visible anteriorly. These two structures are joined by a slightly darker curved line and the central plate is more or less uniform in colour (Fig. 2).

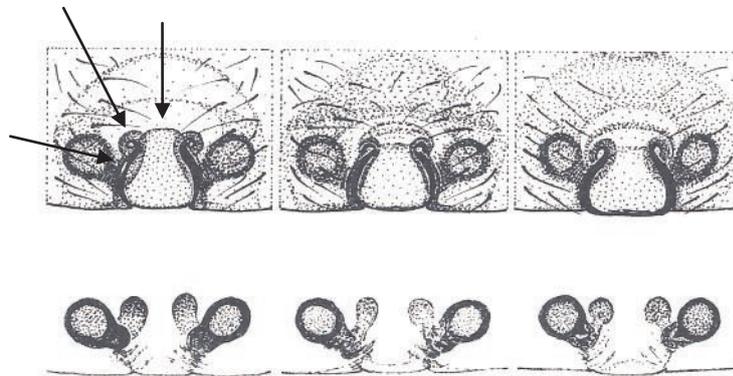


Figure 2. Upper row, epigynes of *Oedothorax retusus* viewed ventrally.
Lower row, cleared internal structures of the epigyne.

Habitats. This species is found in a wide range of habitats but is usually most abundant in various types of grasslands and agricultural habitats including arable fields. It disperses widely by ballooning which explains its frequent occurrence in disturbed agricultural habitats. Adults are active in mid-summer as in the previous species.

Oedothorax apicatus

The epigyne of this species closely resembles that of *O. retusus* in the outline of the central plate. It differs in the lack of a dark curved line across the anterior margin of the central plate and the presence of a clearer central portion to the plate which differs somewhat in extent in different specimens but is always present (Fig. 3). Another useful difference between the two species is that the length of the spine on tibia IV is usually less than 1.8 times the width of the tibia in females of *O. apicatus* while it is usually at least twice the width of the tibia in *O. retusus*.

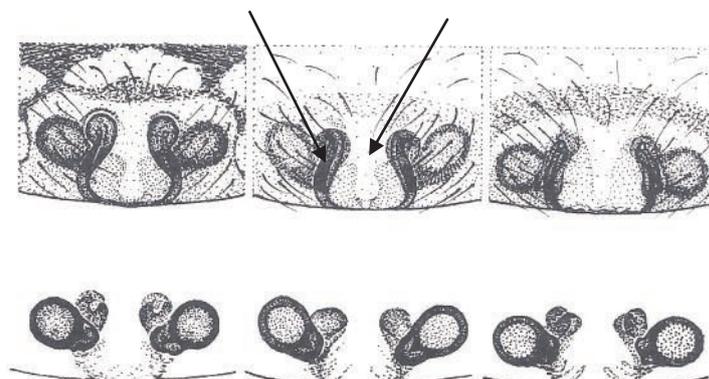


Figure 3. Upper row, epigynes of *Oedothorax apicatus* viewed ventrally.
Lower row, cleared internal structures of the epigyne.

Habitats. As with *Oedothorax retusus*, this species is found in a wide range of open habitats including grasslands, arable fields and shingle. It is also a frequent aeronaut with a peak of adult activity in July.

Oedothorax fuscus

Although the epigyne of this species can occasionally resemble that of *O. apicatus*, it differs in having somewhat smaller spermathecae and a nearly rectangular central plate. The lateral borders of the central plate at first converge slightly anteriorly but then diverge again (Fig. 4). The female abdomen usually has a longitudinal dorsal pale band that is normally lacking in *O. apicatus*.

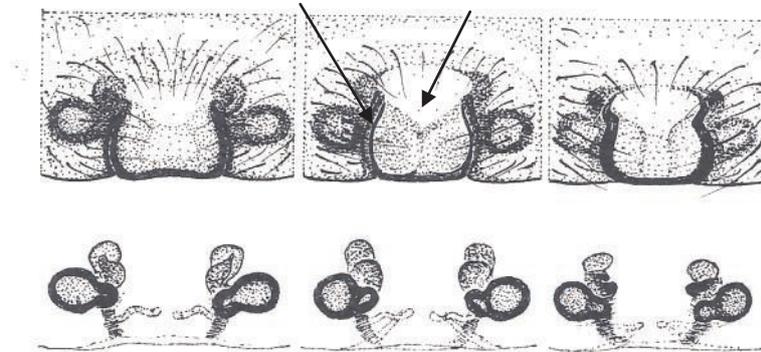


Figure 4. Upper row, epigynes of *Oedothorax fuscus* viewed ventrally.
Lower row, cleared internal structures of the epigyne.

Habitats. *Oedothorax fuscus* is typically found in a variety of grasslands, arable fields, recently burnt heathland and wetland habitats. In coastal areas it is found in salt marshes, shingle and sand dunes. As with other members of the genus, it is a frequent aeronaut and it is possibly the commonest member of the genus in Britain.

Oedothorax agrestis

The epigyne of *O. agrestis* is usually less heavily sclerotised than that of other members of the genus but in form resembles that of *O. fuscus*. It differs in that the central plate is bordered by thinner lines which curve slightly outwards at their anterior ends. Just outside each tip there is a short, faint ridge, convergent anteriorly (Fig. 5). *Oedothorax agrestis* also lacks the light abdominal dorsal band found in *O. fuscus*.

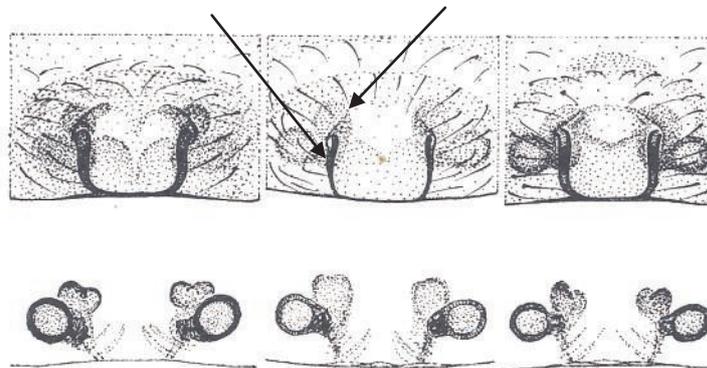


Figure 5. Upper row, epigynes of *Oedothorax agrestis* viewed ventrally.
Lower row, cleared internal structures of the epigyne.

Habitats. In Britain, this is the least frequent member of the genus but still very widespread. Like *O. gibbosus*, it is found in wetland habitats. In the north it is frequently found near upland rivers and in the south is nearly always found in flood debris of streams or ponds. Any individuals, especially females, not found in this habitat should be checked by the BAS Verification Panel. Adults have two peaks of activity, in June and September.

Acknowledgements

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