

Wildlife News

Observations in the Haslemere area - week ending 3/3/24.

There was enough warmth in the sunny spells to bring out Wild Daffodils and carpets of Lesser Celandines and Sweet Violets. Sweet Violets (*Viola odora*) are usually the earliest flowering of our native violets, and are the only ones to have a common white-flowered variety.

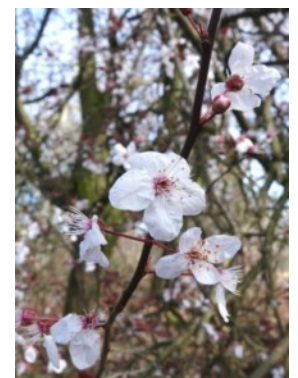
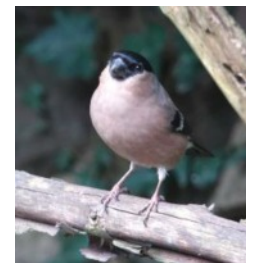
There were reports of the first possible returning migrant Chiffchaffs at Selsey Bill, but in our area the winter assemblage still dominated bird reports: flocks of Siskins at Hollywater, Crossbills at Witley Common and a Mealy Redpoll among Lesser Redpolls at Farnham Heath. The stand-out sighting, though, was a Hen Harrier at Woolmer Forest. Bullfinches have been busy at garden feeders. Jays are normally shy and wary birds, but in a Haslemere garden one has learnt to take a close interest in human activities, as there may be rewards!

It was just warm enough at the end of the week for some fresh insect activity. Bees basking on an old Beech tree belonged to a species of *Andrena* (mining bee), possibly *A. dorsata* (Short-fringed Mining Bee). There are 67 species of these in the UK, and most are relatively featureless – it is a specialist task to identify them. Each species has a specific flying season; some are as early as February and the latest appear in the autumn. The species active in the spring often use willow catkins as nectar sources, but these aren't yet open. A striking parasitic wasp was identified as *Itopectis maculator*; it has a stout ovipositor, suggesting that it penetrates wood to lay eggs on a host grub. New moths for the season were Clouded Drab and Twin-spotted Quaker.

There are few fungi that favour this time of year, but one of them is a beauty: Scarlet Elf Cup, which may be found in swampy places in late winter and early spring. Two very different lichens attracted attention: the bushy *Cladonia portentosa* and the encrusting *Graphis scripta*. The linear black spore-producing structures on the latter bear a fanciful resemblance to an ancient script.

(These observations and photos have been compiled principally from postings by Haslemere Natural History Society members to the Members' Facebook group).

Photos: Jay (by J. Godden); Scarlet Elf Cups (by V. Carter); Bullfinch (male) (by A. Swan); Bullfinch (female) (by A. Swan); Wild Daffodils (by A. Swan); *Graphis scripta* (by A. Swan); *Cladonia portentosa* (by M. Tomsett); *Prunus cerasifera* blossom (by A. Swan); Clouded Drab moth (by M. Tomsett); mining bee *Andrena* cf. *dorsata* (by A. Swan); *Itopectis maculator* (by M. Tomsett).



Wildlife News

Observations in the Haslemere area - week ending 10/3/24.

A Great Grey Shrike at Black Down attracted a good number of visitors this week, with photos appearing on-line on a national birding web site. It was seen on most days through the week (although it eluded us!) and was probably the same bird that had been seen intermittently in the winter months. The improved weather may have facilitated the surge in interest this week.

Other interesting bird reports were Crossbills at the Punch Bowl and Mediterranean Gulls at Frensham Great Pond. There was a reliable report of a Lesser Spotted Woodpecker drumming in Camelsdale – surprising for such a shy bird. The welcome seasonal sound of singing Chiffchaffs is progressing towards us from the coast, with one reported at Selborne.

Two of our most glamorous spring flowers, Marsh Marigold and Wood Anemone, began flowering, the former close to the Wey and the latter in several mature woodlands. The buds of Goat Willows were swelling but not yet quite open.

Butterflies were largely absent in the cooler weather, but there were several “firsts of the season” among the moths: Pine Beauty, Early Thorn, Shoulder-stripe and Red Chestnut – the latter two are uncommon. A beetle larva found in a garden was provisionally identified as that of a Glow-worm: these larvae are voracious predators of snails. An adult male Glow-worm was found in the same garden last summer.

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Photos: Wood Anemone (by M. Tomsett); Marsh Marigold (by A. Swan); Early Thorn moth (by M. Tomsett); Red Chestnut moth (by M. Tomsett); Glow-worm larva (by M. Tomsett); Shoulder Stripe moth (by M. Tomsett); Pine Beauty moth (by A. Swan); Wild Daffodils (by M. Tomsett).



Wildlife News

Observations in the Haslemere area - week ending 17/3/24.

A third attempt at seeing the Great Grey Shrike at Black Down was successful, and the bird showed some classic behaviour. After perching at the top of a tree for many minutes, it dropped down into a bush where it began pecking at a half-eaten mouse that was snagged among the twigs. This species is known as the “butcher bird” because it is carnivorous and stores surplus food items in “larders”. In habitats where there are Blackthorn or Hawthorn bushes, the prey items are often impaled on thorns, but in this case the shrike had just tangled the mouse among the twigs. Shrikes are in the songbird family (the passerines), and are very unusual in this group in eating vertebrates. Rodents, lizards, small birds and large insects are the preferred prey items for the Great Grey Shrike. The need to cache surplus food becomes evident when considering the size of these birds: they are only about a third of the weight of a Kestrel or Sparrowhawk, so eating a whole mouse would be too much in one “sitting”! We are very fortunate in having this spectacular bird locally: there seem to be only about four being reported in England at the moment. It will soon be heading off to its breeding area, probably in Scandinavia.

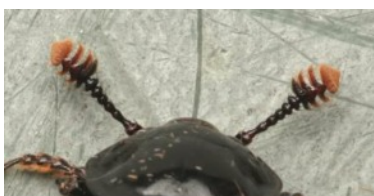
The first singing Chiffchaffs were heard, including at Black Down and Thursley Common. Woodlarks and Skylarks were also heard over our heaths, and Sand Martins have moved across the area. A Curlew was reported at Thursley Common – this is the time when these impressive birds migrate from the south coast to northern breeding areas on boggy moorland, perhaps in Scotland.

There were some warm spells in which Brimstone and Peacock butterflies were on the wing. Buff-tailed and Red-tailed Bumblebees have been visiting flowers and searching for nesting sites. Hairy-footed Flower Bees have also been seen in gardens: these are smaller, pale-faced, fast-flying bees with a high-pitched buzz, often visiting garden flowers near ground level. Among the large numbers of common moths attracted to light, firsts of the season included Early Grey and Double-striped Pug. The moths were joined by a Black Sexton Beetle; when exploring a new environment, it was noted that it unfurled its antennae into curious pagoda-shaped arrays.

The copious frog spawn in at least one garden pond started to hatch into tadpoles this week: possibly a little earlier than usual, no doubt benefiting from the absence of hard frosts.

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Photos: Great Grey Shrike with partly-eaten mouse; and approaching food cache (by A. Swan); Red-tailed Bumblebee (by M. Tomsett); Early Grey moth (by M. Tomsett); Double-striped Pug (by A. Swan); Black Sexton Beetle with close-up of antennae (by A. Swan); frog spawn (by J. Godden).



Wildlife News

Observations in the Haslemere area - week ending 24/3/24.

The mid-week warm sunshine encouraged Adders to bask: both a male and a female were seen on a heath close to the town. The air temperature doesn't have to be particularly high for Adders to do this, as the temperature of sunlit bare ground is much higher. In the summer these snakes have less need to bask, or they may do so early in the morning, so now is perhaps the most likely time that this nationally declining species will be casually encountered. They are shy animals and should, of course, be left alone: dogs should be kept under close control on heathy areas.

The first phase of spring flowers reached its peak, with Primroses, Lesser Celandines, Wood Anemones and Common Dog-violets making welcome splashes of colour in woodlands. Blackthorn is now in full blossom and its patchy distribution along our hedgerows can be noted from a distance. Bluebells, Greater Stitchwort, Cuckooflowers and Wild Cherry are just beginning to show.

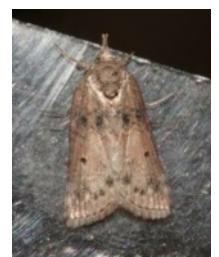
The most exciting bird report was a pair of Black-necked Grebes at Frensham Great Pond: these will have dropped in briefly whilst on a northward migration. Another uncommon record was a Long-tailed Duck in Petworth Park, whilst the Great Grey Shrike on Black Down continued to be seen, at least in the first part of the week. Chiffchaffs became abundant and the first Willow Warblers were reported at Broxhead Common. Sand Martins were reported at Frensham and Skylarks began singing over heaths and farmland, having moved in from their winter coastal refuges.

Brimstone butterflies were on the wing on warm days and Bee-flies made a first appearance. Huge bumblebee queens continued to take nectar and search for holes in which to nest, and Hairy-footed Flower Bees were still busy. The best moths were the uncommon Streamer, Shoulder Stripe and Oak Nycteoline. There was suddenly an abundance of Brindled Pugs, which will persist through the first half of the moth season.

A handsome Fox was photographed in a garden near the town: a rare daytime view of a mainly nocturnal animal.

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Photos: Adder (by V. Carter); Fox x 2 (by J. Godden); Oak Nycteoline moth (by A. Swan); Blackthorn (by A. Swan); Shoulder Stripe and Streamer moths (by M. Tomsett); Brindled Pug moth (by A. Swan); Hairy-footed Flower Bee (by J. Godden); Primroses (by A. Swan).



Wildlife News

Observations in the Haslemere area - week ending 31/3/24.

Large clumps of Wild Cherry blossom and the fluffy yellow catkins of willows have been adorning our roadsides and woodland edges this week. The plumpest catkins belong to the Goat Willow (also known as Sallow and colloquially as “pussy willow”), but willows are difficult to identify. There are about eight species in our area, but the situation is confused by hybridisation. Each willow tree is either male or female: the male catkins are the conspicuous yellowish ones (the pollen-bearing anthers are yellow), whilst female catkins are slimmer and grey-green. Hence, two trees of the same species can appear very different. To further confound the situation, identification is best done using information from catkins and leaves, but these don't show at the same time!

The first part of the week was windy and wildlife reports were few. Sunshine over the Easter weekend stimulated butterflies, including the first Small Tortoiseshells and Commas of the season, and Buzzards enjoyed the thermals, including one with striking pale plumage. Chiffchaffs increased in abundance and there were scattered Blackcaps, but Willow Warblers were still largely absent. Welcome new arrivals were Wheatears on various of our heaths; these will mostly be just passing through. The Waxwings have largely gone but there was a fleeting report of a small flock at Frensham. A Great White Egret was reported at Thursley Common.

A Hummingbird Hawk-moth was reported flitting between flowers at a garden centre in Liss: this species is principally a summer migrant here, but it is thought to be increasingly over-wintering as hibernating adults. There have been several reported in southern England this spring. New nocturnal moths of the season included a handsome Lunar Marbled Brown, plus Powdered Quaker, Brindled Beauty and Spruce Carpet. It was mild enough for bats to emerge to feed: a Common Pipistrelle was detected.

St George's Mushrooms are named for their tendency to appear around St George's Day (April 23rd), but they appeared in a garden this week. They may appear similar to Field Mushrooms from above, but turning them over reveals pale gills and a ringless stem.

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Photos: Small Tortoiseshell (by A. Swan); Buzzard (by A. Swan); Lunar Marbled Brown moth (by A. Swan); Spruce Carpet moth (by M. Tomsett); Goat Willow male catkins (by A. Swan); male catkins of willow ?hybrid (by A. Swan); Wild Cherry (by A. Swan); Brindled Beauty moth (by M. Tomsett); Powdered Quaker moth (by A. Swan); St George's Mushroom (by J. Godden).

