

Wildlife News

Observations in the Haslemere area - week ending 5/1/25.

A night-time walk on a local common revealed a flurry of activity among Winter Moths. These may be most familiar as the moths illuminated by car headlights on country lanes. The flying ones are males and the females are wingless, and the males seen flying are seeking tree trunks or fences where females are spreading pheromones to attract mates. Once mated, the ability of the female to distribute eggs is limited, so concentrations of females in favourable sites are to be expected. Another seasonal speciality, the neatly marked Common Quaker made its first appearance this week.

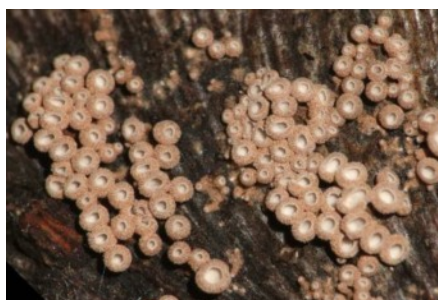
The cold weather prompted an overhaul of a log pile, and a cluster of stipples was noticed on a damp apple log. On closer inspection, it was found to be a tight group of fungal structures, each about 1.5mm in diameter and consisting of a bowl-shaped smooth spore-producing surface surrounded by a shaggy raised rim. This is a common configuration for cup fungi, and it looked like the cup fungus *Lasiobelonium variegatum*. There are two main and fundamentally separate groups of fungi: the ascomycetes, in which spores are arranged inside sausage-shaped sacs (asci), and the basidiomycetes, where spores are generated externally on club-shaped structures (basidia). After microscopic examination the identification had to be reviewed: it appears instead to be *Merismodes anomala*, very much a look-alike of the cup fungus. This belongs to a group known as the cyphelloids: these are related to familiar gill-bearing mushroom-shaped fungi, but the "mushroom" has been reduced to such a size that there is no room for gills! Also very small (2mm diameter) was *Mycena clavularis*, which has become a regular in the middle of damp winters on a rough-barked garden tree.

Two unusual lichens were noticed. Wrinkled pale grey sheets with prickly undersurfaces found occasionally on heathland were *Peltigera membranacea*, which belong to a group known as the dog lichens. There are many species of *Cladonia* that have antler, club or goblet shaped structures. Some of these sprout bright red spore producing surfaces, and the one found this week is provisionally identified as *Cladonia diversa*.

A report of a single Brambling in the town is hopefully the first of many of this colourful winter visitor. Further afield, a remarkable seven Water Rails were reported at Unstead (Godalming).

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

Photos: The fungus *Merismodes anomala* (2 photos) (by A. Swan); Winter Moth pair mating (by C. Adsett); the lichen *Peltigera membranacea* (by G. House); Common Quaker moth (by M. Tomsett); the fungus *Mycena clavularis* (by A. Swan); the lichen *Cladonia ?diversa* (by M. Tomsett).



Wildlife News

Observations in the Haslemere area - week ending 12/1/25.

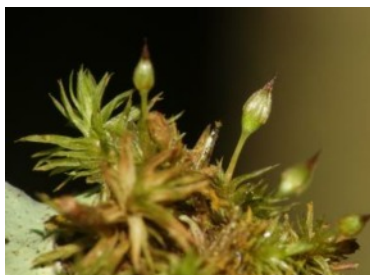
Great Spotted Woodpeckers began drumming this week: this was reported as commencing on the same day (Friday) by several observers in different places. Although not exactly a sign of spring (it can happen pre-Christmas), this territorial behaviour does show that the birds are preparing for the new season. The much rarer Lesser Spotted Woodpecker was reported from RSPB Farnham Heath late in the week. The highlight of the week, though, was a Hen Harrier seen on two days at Woolmer Forest. It had a band on the tail (referred to as a "ringtail") which indicates a juvenile or female. Also at this site was an unusually large flock of Meadow Pipits (14), but this was dwarfed by the flock of 100 Linnets reported late in the week at Milford.

It was a difficult week for water birds: most of our ponds and lakes developed an inch-thick coating of ice. Ponds that are directly fed by springs, though, were a little warmer and were packed with ducks, gulls, Moorhens and Coots.

Several members of the Society undertook the annual search for plants flowering in the first 7 days of the year (plants tended in gardens excluded). The total was 19: Hairy Bittercress, Primrose, Common Gorse, Petty Spurge, Herb Robert, Ivy, Hazel, Holly, Great Periwinkle, Ivy-leaved Toadflax, Common Field Speedwell, Hogweed, Daisy, Buttercup, Dandelion, Smooth Sow-thistle, Ragwort, Groundsel, Annual Meadow Grass. This was down on the 27 last year, and many of this year's flowers were only barely open. The lack of sun in late December resulted in the soil staying cool, and the frost and snow certainly didn't help! Common Gorse is probably the only plant on the list for which mid-winter flowering in the wild is normal – indeed, blossoms were luxuriant in places.

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Photos (all by A. Swan): Common Gorse; Black-headed Gulls; the moss *Orthotrichum affine* (with stalked spore capsules); the lichen *Xanthoria polycarpa* (with abundant apothecia).



Wildlife News

Observations in the Haslemere area - week ending 19/1/25.

For a couple of days the cold and gloom were interrupted by some relatively balmy weather. This triggered an enthusiastic dawn and dusk chorus, and there was some revival of insect life. Two uncommon nocturnal moths were found attracted to light: the Dark Chestnut and the micro-moth *Agonopterix arenella*. It is extraordinary that among the very few active insects this week there was also one of the UK's most exotic-looking beetles: the Minotaur Beetle. We have noticed in recent years that this species is liable to emerge from heathland burrows on mild nights throughout the winter. Only the males have the characteristic bull-like horns. Structures such as these in insects are typically used for tournaments between rival males.

The first singing Woodlark of the season was heard at Woolmer Pond, and there was also a lot of noise from Tawny Owls in wooded areas. A Barn Owl was glimpsed in a garden to the east of the town, where a Sparrowhawk was also noted. Further afield, a Cattle Egret was reported at Waverley Abbey. Bird-watchers on the Sussex coast (near Seaford) have been distracted this week by a Humpback Whale!

Now that the vegetation killed by the frosts has shrunk away, the tiny plants that soon get shaded-out in spring have come to the fore. It is still too early for most of the mosses and liverworts to produce spore capsules, and identification using just leaves is a challenge. The distinctive two-pronged leaves of the liverwort *Lophocolea bidentata* are an exception, and this common species can be found now on stones and wet logs near ground level.

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Photos: Minotaur Beetle – male (by A. Swan); same, with appendages retracted (by A. Swan); Minotaur Beetle – female (by A. Swan); the micromoth *Agonopterix arenella* (by M. Tomsett); Dark Chestnut moth (by M. Tomsett); the liverwort *Lophocolea bidentata* (by A. Swan).



Wildlife News

Observations in the Haslemere area - week ending 26/1/25.

The RSPB's national "Big Garden Birdwatch" took place over the weekend. For anyone who attempted the count on Sunday, numbers will have been dramatically affected by the weather. On Saturday one garden yielded 10 species: Woodpigeon, Blackbird, Robin, Dunnock, Blue Tit, Great Tit, Nuthatch, House Sparrow, Goldfinch and Bullfinch, of which only Nuthatch and Bullfinch may not be among the most-recorded species nationally.

Needless to say, birds were much more abundant and diverse during the Society's visit to RSPB Pulborough Brooks. Among the range of duck species, the large number of Wigeon was particularly striking, and the Pintails were very handsome. A good number of Snipe were seen, and there was a distant sighting of the White-tailed Eagles, for which the reserve has become renowned.

Elsewhere, the best bird report was a Bearded Tit at Shalford Water Meadows – not the first one in that area this season. A Woodcock was seen at Woolmer Pond and a Red Kite just to the east of the town. Following the rapid spread of Red Kites in the last 20 years, it might have been expected that they would become more frequent hereabouts. There is a strong colony to the west of our area, but sightings near the town and eastwards are still not common.

Despite generally unfavourable conditions, there was a first Spring Usher moth of the season. Also giving grounds for optimism were the distinctively blotched emerging leaves of Early Purple Orchids.

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Photos: Early Purple Orchid leaves (by M. Tomsett); Spring Usher moth (by M. Tomsett); Red Kite (by M. Tomsett); Jay (by A. Swan).

