

Wildlife News

Observations in the Haslemere area - week ending 4/1/26.

Conditions were just right in mid-week for the formation of hair ice. This remarkable phenomenon consists of bunches of filaments of ice attached to rotten wood (small branches and large twigs). Since it was first described more than a century ago, the process by which it forms has been mysterious: it wasn't even clear whether it was a matter of biology, chemistry or physics! It was only in 2015 that a scientific paper revealed the solution to the mystery, and it involves the encrusting jelly fungus *Exidiopsis effusa*, which is normally inconspicuous. The explanation is highly technical, but it involves an antifreeze-like chemical produced by the fungus: the water inside the wood doesn't freeze, but it freezes and expands when exposed to the air at tiny pores in the wood surface. Whereas ice crystals grow at the tips, these filaments grow at the base, with earlier-formed parts pushed out. The fungus isn't very common, and neither are the conditions needed for this to happen.

At the beginning of the year, botanical and natural history groups all around the country undertake a search for plants flowering at this most adverse time. Our Society allows the first 7 days of January for this; so far, the nicest flowers found are probably of Common Ramping-fumitory (actually not very common) and the most striking display is, as always, Common Gorse. Catkins of Hazel are now open in a few sheltered spots.

Following our previous report of an isolated instance of a Great Spotted Woodpecker drumming, this has now become widespread, including some audible from the centre of town. A Dartford Warbler was seen at Frensham Little Pond, and a flock of Mistle Thrushes near Midhurst (probably taking advantage of the abundance of Mistletoe berries in that area), but perhaps the best bird this week was a Woodcock at Woolmer Forest.

A large proportion of UK butterfly and moth species over-winter as caterpillars, and they are often uncovered from their refuges when tidying gardens. One of the most frequent this year in one garden has been the Angle Shades moth, despite that fact that this species was unusually sparse as an adult in 2025.

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

Photos: Hair ice (x2) (by T. Hardy); Common Ramping-fumitory (by J. Godden); Common Gorse (by A. Swan); Hazel catkin (by A. Swan); caterpillar of Angle Shades moth (by M. Tomsett); Grey Heron (by A. Swan).



Wildlife News

Observations in the Haslemere area - week ending 11/1/26.

Our New Year compilation of flowering plants (Jan 1-7) produced a list of 21 species: quite reasonable, considering the freezing weather for much of the time. There has been just enough sun to encourage flowering in sheltered spots, especially against walls. The full list was: Creeping Buttercup, Common Ramping-fumitory, Common Gorse, Primrose, Hairy Bitter-cress, Wild Strawberry, Hazel, Petty Spurge, Heath Speedwell, Cut-leaved Dead-nettle, Purple Deadnettle, Lesser Periwinkle, Mexican Fleabane, Common Daisy, Ox-eye Daisy, Groundsel, Dandelion, Mouse-ear Hawkweed, Snowdrop, Annual Meadow-grass, Cock's-foot. We have heard that places at lower altitude are able to produce lists at least twice as long!

We are approaching a prime time of the year for mosses and liverworts: they grow strongly before the new season's tree leaves shade them, and many are about to produce distinctive spore capsules. The Common Feather-moss *Kindbergia praelonga* is an ornament on the ground in many wooded settings, and species of *Orthotrichum* are abundant on twigs. A close look at patches of green on twigs may reveal a miniature world of interactions between liverworts, lichens and mosses, including the extremely diminutive *Microlejeunea ulicina* which has the quaint English name "Fairy Beads", which consists of chains of 0.2mm leaves.

A white jelly fungus enveloping mosses on a log was *Exidia nucleata*, which has the new English name "Crystal Brain Fungus"! Inside the jelly there are tiny crystals of calcium oxalate – perhaps these deter grazers.

The freezing conditions caused our water birds to abandon our ponds and lakes, presumably for the coast. Surprisingly, there didn't seem to be a big increase in visits to garden feeders, so some smaller birds may also have moved on. Further afield, there was excitement on the Selsey peninsula when a flock of nine Common Cranes flew over: unprecedented in recent times, and hopefully presaging a time when these magnificent birds will become more widespread in the UK.

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Photos: The liverwort *Microlejeunea ulicina* growing among the long tongue-shaped leaves of the liverwort *Metzgeria furcata* (by A. Swan); Common Feather-moss (by M. Tomsett); the jelly fungus *Exidia nucleata* (by M. Tomsett); the moss *Orthotrichum* sp. (by A. Swan); Frensham Little Pond covered with snow on ice (by A. Swan).



Wildlife News

Observations in the Haslemere area - week ending 18/1/26.

A sign of the progress towards spring was the singing of male Woodlarks: just one at the beginning of the week at Woolmer Forest, but five by the end. An unusual sighting on the Pond there was a Pintail duck, but otherwise it was a quiet week for birds. Garden observers are missing the Bramblings that usually appear in the town in the winter.

By January standards, it was a good week for moths, with the uncommon Small Brindled Beauty and Early Moth plus large numbers of Spring Ushers enjoying the mild weather. Also attracted to lights at night was the picture-wing fly *Dioxyna bidentis*, for which there are only about 140 records on the national database. Its larvae are reckoned to be specialist feeders on flowers of Tripartite Bur-marigold: an uncommon plant with no known sites nearby!

Two of the most abundant woodland fungi are the ochre-coloured and wavy mini-brackets of *Stereum hirsutum* and the flatter and neatly multi-zoned half-discs of *Coriolus versicolor* ("Turkey Tail"). Much less common but found this week, and appearing like a blend of the two, was *Stereum subtomentosum* – a very striking fungus.

Standing out from a moss-covered stone, a number of shiny black spheres on stems were found: these are liverwort spore capsules. Tracing them back to their bases usually reveals the parent plant, but in this case none were found, but it was probably of the genus *Lophocolea*. These structures constitute the sporophyte generation; they arise from a fertilised female receptacle in the parent leafy plant (gametophyte generation), but in this case the leafy parts seem to have withered away.

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Photos: *Stereum subtomentosum* (by T. Hardy); the picture-wing fly *Dioxyna bidentis* (by A. Swan); Small Brindled Beauty moth (by A. Swan); Spring Usher moth (by M. Tomsett); Early Moth (by A. Swan); spore capsules of the liverwort *Lophocolea* (by A. Swan).



Wildlife News

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

The garden birds survey co-ordinated by RSPB ran on Friday to Sunday. The top count among our correspondents was a very respectable 17 species. These comprised a good showing of largely common birds, but less common species reported included Marsh Tit, Blackcap and Sparrowhawk. It seems to have been a busy week for the latter: they were also seen in a different garden earlier in the week eating a small bird, and remains of their kills in the form of circles of feathers were noticed at a third site.

The Society's visit to RSPB Pulborough Brooks benefited from pleasant weather on the day, but was handicapped by the wet weather earlier in the week. The meadows at the reserve were almost completely flooded; the water was too deep even for the waders that normally abound there in January. There were, however, plenty of ducks bobbing on the water, with especially large numbers of Wigeon, Pintail and Shoveler. At one point the ducks were disturbed by a marauding Marsh Harrier, and other uncommon birds included Little Gull and a few of the White-fronted Geese that have been reported all along the south recently. The total tally of species seen was a healthy 49.

The green tips of the new season's plant growth have become quite noticeable along waysides, but it is still too early for spring flowers - except for drifts of Snowdrops (which are not UK natives). There is interest, though, in other plants. Many ferns have foliage that is "annual", and last year's fronds are now brown and collapsed. Others, including the polypody ferns, have year-round green fronds. Polypodies grow on tree branches (epiphytic) and on walls and banks. There are potentially three species locally: the Common Polypody, Southern Polypody (rare here) and Intermediate Polypody. They are not straightforward to tell apart: the Intermediate is thought to have originally arisen as a hybrid between the other two. Plants with long, parallel-sided fronds, with pinnae (leaflets) that are rounded will probably be Common Polypody. The underside of the leaves reveals the positions of the spore-producing structures. A curious liverwort found on bark this week was *Cololejeunea minutissima* ("Minute Pouncewort"), which has abundant star-shaped perianths. A lens is required: these structures are only about 0.4mm, and the whole plant looks at first like clumps of pale green powder.

There were one or two nights that were reasonable for moths, with Spring Ushers (many colour variants) and Chestnuts especially common, plus the nicely dotted micro-moth *Acleris notana/ferrugana*: the two species named not being distinguishable without dissection under a microscope.

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Photos: Marsh Tit (by M. Tomsett); Common Polypody (by V. Carter); Common Polypody underside showing sporangia (by V. Carter); *Acleris notana/ferrugana* (by A. Swan); a drab variant of Spring Usher (by A. Swan); Chestnut moth (by M. Tomsett); the liverwort *Cololejeunea minutissima* (by A. Swan).

