

Wildlife notes, January 4th, 2026.

I've been enjoying this cold, crisp weather which makes it seem like a "proper" winter, doesn't it!

I'm sure that many of you will be putting out food for the birds, and if you can manage, it's also really good to try to keep some water unfrozen for them. I've had all the usual suspects on my feeders – house sparrows and tree sparrows, goldfinches, chaffinches and the occasional greenfinch, great, blue, coal and long-tailed tits, and although they are not everyone's favourites, lots of Jackdaws and Pigeons. I really have a soft spot for them and make sure that I put out bird seed with plenty large grains like wheat and barley, which they love. The Jackdaws are also very good at hanging onto the peanut feeders, although not so good at catching the peanut morsels they peck out, causing a rain of bits of nut to be scrabbled over by the waiting pigeons, blackbirds and other Jackdaws below. It is comical to see all the heads looking up to see where the next bit of nut is going to land!

The thing which has really spurred me on to write another note to you all, is the unusual ice formations which I have been seeing in this cold snap. Who would have thought that frost could be so interesting!

In January 2021 I spoke to you about "Hair Ice", which I had found in the Beechwoods. This beautiful hair like ice is formed under very specific conditions of temperature and moisture, and is only found on rotting logs affected by one particular species of fungus. It is not exactly clear how the fungus helps to create the ice, but it is thought that it produces some kind of chemical which stops the fragile, tiny hairs of ice from recrystallising into larger crystals of ice in the cold air. Certainly, scientists have found that hair ice cannot form where this fungus is not present!



Well, yesterday, I thought I had found more hair ice, on dead thistle stems at the top of the track to Coalpit Den. But on further research I was reminded about the need for rotting wood and fungus, which the thistles, of course, didn't have. So, then I found out about "Frost Flowers"! These are formed in very unusual circumstances too, when there is still some tiny amount of moisture left in the ground which rises up the plant stems by the usual capillary action, (or up dead stems where the water carrying tubes, or xylem, are still intact). When the moisture hits the cold surface air it turns to ice and is forced out of the plant through tiny pores, forming amazing, fragile frost formations, which often curl and twist and look like petals.

Frost and ice on an everyday basis can make beautiful patterns on a frosty car windscreen, or create amazing hoar frost on any extremely cold item. If the air is damp then the water in the air freezes on the cold surface and can grow out ice crystals into fabulous patterns. We've had several lovely photos of hoar frost in our calendar over the years!

So, it might be freezing and the time of colds, and runny noses, but if you are out and about, please do take the time to notice the beauty of the frost all around us. And if you are really lucky, you might spot some Frost Flowers – the two at the Coalpit Den track are still there!

