# Spindle ermine moth caterpillars cloak East Anglia trees in eerie webs this summer



In a striking natural phenomenon, trees at Holkham National Nature Reserve have recently become enveloped in an extensive blanket of webbing, drawing attention from both locals and nature enthusiasts alike. This eerie webbing, which resembles an otherworldly decoration, is not the result of early Halloween festivities but rather the protective structures created by spindle ermine moth caterpillars. These caterpillars often go unnoticed due to their minuscule size, yet they congregate in vast numbers, resulting in the dramatic transformation of hedgerows and trees.

Holkham Conservation, through its recent social media posts, highlighted the extent of this unusual spectacle. Infestations have been so pervasive that entire trees and sections of hedgerows have been stripped of their leaves, leaving behind a ghostly appearance. This phenomenon has been reported across East Anglia, with similar occurrences noted in Suffolk and beyond. In these regions, extensive webs have turned stretches of vegetation into shimmering, silken canopies, sparking both wonder and concern among observers.

Experts indicate that the cover of webs serves as a crucial defence mechanism for the caterpillars, making it difficult for predatory birds to spot them while they feed and prepare to metamorphose into moths. While this can result in defoliation, experts from the Norfolk Wildlife Trust have assured the public that the webs and the caterpillars are harmless to humans and pets. As these caterpillars mature, the webs typically dissolve, and the impacted trees often recover their foliage by the end of summer.

This annual phenomenon is influenced by environmental factors, with caterpillar populations fluctuating based on weather conditions in the preceding months. Reports of similar webs have been common over the years, and it is suggested that a population surge may occur following favourable weather, resulting in increased visibility of these webs. In Bedford, for example, a stunning 100-foot stretch of trees was covered in the same silken structures, indicating a broader trend across regions impacted by the spindle ermine moth.

Interestingly, the spindle ermine moth (Yponomeuta cagnagella) is a well-established resident in the UK, particularly flourishing in chalk and limestone areas. Their lifecycle includes a solitary generation that emerges around late June to early September, and they are not listed as a concern within the UK Biodiversity Action Plan. Though the caterpillars may consume significant amounts of foliage, the long-term health of the plants tends to remain intact, with recovery observed each summer.

Community reactions to the striking webs have varied, with some marveling at their eerie beauty while others express concern about the potential impact on the local flora. Nonetheless, it is clear that this occurrence represents a fascinating intersection of natural beauty and ecological behaviour, reminding us of the intricate dynamics of life cycles in the wild.

As autumn approaches and the caterpillars transform into moths, the webs will gradually fade, leaving behind a landscape that has briefly donned a mystifying cloak. For now, nature enthusiasts and casual observers alike can appreciate the spectacle that these little caterpillars create, woven seamlessly into the fabric of our ecosystems.

## Reference Map:

* Paragraph 1 – [[1]](https://www.edp24.co.uk/news/25183314.ghostly-looking-webs-cover-trees-holkham-nature-reserve/?ref=rss), [[4]](https://www.edp24.co.uk/news/25183314.ghostly-looking-webs-cover-trees-holkham-nature-reserve/?ref=rss)
* Paragraph 2 – [[1]](https://www.edp24.co.uk/news/25183314.ghostly-looking-webs-cover-trees-holkham-nature-reserve/?ref=rss), [[2]](https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-england-norfolk-61492121), [[4]](https://www.edp24.co.uk/news/25183314.ghostly-looking-webs-cover-trees-holkham-nature-reserve/?ref=rss)
* Paragraph 3 – [[3]](https://www.bbc.com/news/uk-england-beds-bucks-herts-57356372), [[6]](https://butterfly-conservation.org/news-and-blog/dont-worry-about-ermine-webs)
* Paragraph 4 – [[5]](https://butterfly-conservation.org/moths/spindle-ermine), [[7]](https://www.wildlifeinsight.com/30257/extensive-webs-of-tiny-caterpillars-in-hedges-and-trees/)
* Paragraph 5 – [[1]](https://www.edp24.co.uk/news/25183314.ghostly-looking-webs-cover-trees-holkham-nature-reserve/?ref=rss), [[2]](https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-england-norfolk-61492121), [[3]](https://www.bbc.com/news/uk-england-beds-bucks-herts-57356372), [[6]](https://butterfly-conservation.org/news-and-blog/dont-worry-about-ermine-webs)

Source: [Noah Wire Services](https://www.noahwire.com)

## Bibliography

1. <https://www.edp24.co.uk/news/25183314.ghostly-looking-webs-cover-trees-holkham-nature-reserve/?ref=rss> - Please view link - unable to able to access data
2. <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-england-norfolk-61492121> - An amateur photographer in Norfolk captured images of hedgerows covered in web-like blankets, likely created by ermine moth caterpillars. The Norfolk Wildlife Trust identified them as a type of micro ermine moth caterpillar, noting that such webs are common in hedgerows and serve to protect the caterpillars from predators. The webs do not harm the host plants and typically disappear once the caterpillars mature into moths. This phenomenon is observed annually, with caterpillar populations fluctuating based on environmental conditions.
3. <https://www.bbc.com/news/uk-england-beds-bucks-herts-57356372> - In Bedford, extensive webs formed by ermine moth caterpillars covered a 100ft stretch of trees along the A5134. These webs are created by the caterpillars to shield themselves from predators while feeding on the leaves. Experts noted that such occurrences could indicate a population surge following favorable weather conditions. Despite their eerie appearance, the webs and caterpillars are harmless, and the affected trees typically recover by the end of summer.
4. <https://www.edp24.co.uk/news/25183314.ghostly-looking-webs-cover-trees-holkham-nature-reserve/?ref=rss> - Holkham Conservation reported on social media about trees in the nature reserve being covered in 'extensive webbing.' The webs, created by spindle ermine moth caterpillars, can cause significant damage to leaves and plants. Entire sections of hedgerows and trees have been draped with the webbing, leading to defoliation. The caterpillars use these webs to protect themselves from predators as they prepare to chrysalis into moths. The webs are harmless to humans and dogs and usually last on trees for a few weeks. Similar webbing was observed across East Anglia in 2022.
5. <https://butterfly-conservation.org/moths/spindle-ermine> - The Spindle Ermine (Yponomeuta cagnagella) is a common resident moth in the UK, particularly in chalk or limestone areas. Its forewings are uniformly white with black dots. The caterpillars feed gregariously in webs on spindle and evergreen spindle plants, sometimes defoliating entire bushes or hedges. These webs serve as protection against predators. The moth flies at night from late June to early September in a single generation. The species is not listed under the UK Biodiversity Action Plan and is considered a common resident.
6. <https://butterfly-conservation.org/news-and-blog/dont-worry-about-ermine-webs> - During certain times of the year, reports emerge of silken webbing covering sections of hedgerows and trees, often attributed to Small Ermine moths. These webs, produced by caterpillars, can look sinister but are harmless. The webs provide protection from predators, and the caterpillars feed on various plants, including blackthorn and hawthorn. The webs typically last from May to June, after which they disappear, and the affected plants usually recover. The adult moths, which are white or greyish with black dots, emerge later in summer.
7. <https://www.wildlifeinsight.com/30257/extensive-webs-of-tiny-caterpillars-in-hedges-and-trees/> - Extensive webs of tiny caterpillars from several species of Ermine Moth are being observed across the UK. These caterpillars, often difficult to identify when inside their silk webs, feed on plants like blackthorn, hawthorn, spindle, and bird cherry. The webs can cover large areas of hedges and trees, leading to defoliation. The phenomenon is particularly noted in the case of the Spindle Ermine, which feeds on spindle trees and hedging. Such infestations are a natural occurrence and typically do not harm the overall health of the plants.