# Spindle ermine moth caterpillars create ghostly webs across Holkham Nature Reserve



Holkham Conservation recently drew attention to an extraordinary natural phenomenon unfolding within the Holkham Nature Reserve in North Norfolk. Vast swathes of trees are now draped in extensive webs, a sight that has sparked both curiosity and concern among local visitors. This webbing, initially mistaken for Halloween decorations, actually conceals the caterpillars of the spindle ermine moth—small creatures that are crucial to the ecology of the region.

The webs serve a vital purpose, providing shelter for the caterpillars as they munch through the foliage of spindle trees, leaving many plants entirely defoliated. According to experts, including those from environmental organisations and research institutions, this behaviour can be observed in various regions, with reports also emerging from Suffolk and beyond. While the aesthetic might evoke an eerie Halloween vibe, these webs pose no real threat to either humans or pets, lasting typically only a few weeks before the caterpillars pupate into moths.

The spindle ermine moth, known scientifically as *Yponomeuta cagnagella*, is a well-documented resident species in the UK, preferring habitats in scrub and hedgerows, in addition to urban environments. Notably, their presence and feeding patterns are most active during the warm months from late June to early September. Though the extensive webbing can strip a tree of its leaves, experts assure that the affected plants usually show resilience, recovering fully in due course.

While the short-term impact on plant life may appear severe, studies indicate that these caterpillars’ feeding habits do not have lasting detrimental effects on their host plants, such as spindle and bird cherry. According to entomologists and conservationists, the cyclical process of defoliation and subsequent recovery is a natural component of the ecosystems in which these moths thrive. This phenomenon has been noted in various parts of the UK, with similar occurrences recorded as recently as last year across East Anglia.

The public reaction to these webs often combines fascination with a degree of alarm. Observers might be misled by their ghostly appearance; however, naturalists stress that the webs are indeed a harmless aspect of local biodiversity. “Despite their initially alarming look, these webs are an important part of the lifecycle of these moths and a testament to the intricate interactions within our ecosystems,” commented a representative from Butterfly Conservation.

As the season progresses, the webs will gradually diminish, allowing the trees to breathe and rejuvenate. The adult spindle ermine moths will emerge later in the summer, continuing the lifecycle of this remarkable species. Thus, while the webs may momentarily dominate the landscape, they are a fleeting yet fascinating reminder of the wonders of nature's processes at work. Observers can look forward to witnessing the transformation that follows, marking yet another cycle of growth and renewal in the countryside.

Holkham Nature Reserve continues to be a site where one can appreciate both the beauty and the complexity of nature, urging visitors to observe these webs with curiosity rather than concern.

## Reference Map:

* Paragraph 1 – [[1]](https://www.edp24.co.uk/news/25183314.ghostly-looking-webs-cover-trees-holkham-nature-reserve/?ref=rss), [[3]](https://www.livescience.com/62822-eerie-caterpillar-web-covers-tree.html)
* Paragraph 2 – [[2]](https://www.butterfly-conservation.org/moths/spindle-ermine), [[5]](https://www.butterfly-conservation.org/news-and-blog/dont-worry-about-ermine-webs)
* Paragraph 3 – [[4]](https://www.rhs.org.uk/biodiversity/small-ermine-moths), [[6]](https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2021/jul/03/country-diary-whats-behind-this-silken-grey-cloud)
* Paragraph 4 – [[7]](https://www.bbc.com/news/uk-england-beds-bucks-herts-57356372)

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## 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.butterfly-conservation.org/moths/spindle-ermine> - The Spindle Ermine (Yponomeuta cagnagella) is a common resident moth in the UK, primarily found in scrub, hedgerows, and urban areas, especially on chalk or limestone soils. Its caterpillars feed gregariously on spindle trees (Euonymus europaeus) and evergreen spindle (Euonymus japonicus), creating extensive webs that can defoliate entire bushes or hedges. These webs serve as protection from predators and parasites. The moths are active from late June to early September, with a single generation per year. Despite the defoliation, host plants typically recover, and the webs usually last only a few weeks. ([butterfly-conservation.org](https://butterfly-conservation.org/moths/spindle-ermine?utm_source=openai))
3. <https://www.livescience.com/62822-eerie-caterpillar-web-covers-tree.html> - Ermine moth caterpillars create extensive webs on trees, serving as protection from predators and parasites. These webs can cover entire trees, leading to significant defoliation. While the webs may look alarming, they are harmless to humans and dogs. The caterpillars feed on the leaves, and the webs typically last for a few weeks. After the caterpillars pupate into moths, the webs disappear, and the trees usually recover. ([livescience.com](https://www.livescience.com/62822-eerie-caterpillar-web-covers-tree.html?utm_source=openai))
4. <https://www.rhs.org.uk/biodiversity/small-ermine-moths> - Small ermine moths, belonging to the genus Yponomeuta, are known for their caterpillars that feed gregariously within sheets of webbing on various plants, including hawthorn, apple, bird cherry, and spindle. The caterpillars are creamy white with black spots and can cause extensive defoliation, leading to the appearance of ghostly webs on affected plants. Despite the alarming appearance, these webs and the resulting defoliation do not typically harm the long-term health of the host plants. ([rhs.org.uk](https://www.rhs.org.uk/biodiversity/small-ermine-moths?utm_source=openai))
5. <https://www.butterfly-conservation.org/news-and-blog/dont-worry-about-ermine-webs> - Reports of ghostly silken webbing covering sections of hedgerows and individual trees are often due to caterpillars of small ermine moths. These webs, produced by caterpillars feeding on plants like spindle and bird-cherry, serve as protection from predators. While the webs can look sinister, they are harmless and usually last from May to June. The affected plants typically recover, and the adult moths emerge later in summer. ([butterfly-conservation.org](https://butterfly-conservation.org/news-and-blog/dont-worry-about-ermine-webs?utm_source=openai))
6. <https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2021/jul/03/country-diary-whats-behind-this-silken-grey-cloud> - The silken grey cloud observed on trees is often the result of spindle ermine moth caterpillars feeding on the leaves of spindle trees. These caterpillars create extensive webs that can strip the trees of their leaves. Despite the defoliation, the trees usually recover, and the webs disappear over the summer. The adult moths emerge later in the season, continuing the cycle. ([theguardian.com](https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2021/jul/03/country-diary-whats-behind-this-silken-grey-cloud?utm_source=openai))
7. <https://www.bbc.com/news/uk-england-beds-bucks-herts-57356372> - Hungry caterpillars have covered a 100ft (30m) expanse of trees in a huge ghostly-looking web along a stretch of the A5134 close to Bedford. The webbing has been created by ermine moth caterpillars, which use the webs to protect themselves from predatory birds while they feed on the leaves. The caterpillars are harmless, and the webs are a natural occurrence during their feeding period. ([bbc.com](https://www.bbc.com/news/uk-england-beds-bucks-herts-57356372?utm_source=openai))