

Please record and report any White-letter Hairstreak findings, include:

Date

Time

Weather conditions

Description of what was observed (e.g. 1 adult male butterfly sighted resting on sunlit elm branch in canopy)

Location (GPS, map reference and/or description)

Photograph if possible

Send your findings to jplackett@butterfly-conservation.org

For more information on the White-letter Hairstreak please visit: <https://butterfly-conservation.org/50-709/white-letter-hairstreak.html>

Thank you for helping gather data on this enigmatic butterfly.



White-letter Hairstreak Finder's Guide



Male



Female

The White-letter Hairstreak is a small butterfly that is distinguished by a white 'W' mark across the underside. The dark upper side is only seen in flight as the butterflies always settle with their wings closed. Adults spend most of their time in the tree canopy and occasionally come to ground level to nectar on flowers near elm trees such as bramble. The species declined during the 1970s when its food plants were decimated by Dutch Elm Disease, but is recovering in a few areas.



Begin your search by locating elm trees, the food plant for the caterpillar White-letter Hairstreak. Both English and Wych Elm support the butterfly and can be found in hedgerows and woodlands. Wych Elm is preferred by the butterfly and has been less affected by Dutch Elm Disease; it is often found close to rivers and streams.

Once you have found an elm tree start looking for clues that may lead you to an adult butterfly. For example if you look up at the elm canopy you may see the distinctive feeding pattern of the larva (caterpillar) as seen on the right. Shadows of larvae or pupae (chrysalis) on leaves may also be observed.



Adult butterflies are on the wing from the beginning of July until mid August (weather dependent). Search the outer sunlit branches of elm trees in early morning or late afternoon. Adult White-letter Hairstreaks can be found walking on or flying close to sunlit elm vegetation in a distinctive, erratic, spiraling flight pattern that is typical of hairstreaks.

The adult butterfly has a reputation for being elusive as it is small in size (barely larger than the size of a thumbnail) and tends to stick to the top of the canopy. It is therefore helpful to keep a keen eye out for the other life stages of the butterfly.

White-letter Hairstreak eggs (0.8mm in diameter) are a good indicator that the butterfly is breeding in the area. They can be observed on the most recent girdle scar (where new growth meets previous years growth) on elm trees. Eggs can be found year round, when laid in August they start off "sea green" with a white rim and darken as the year progresses.



The larvae can be observed from February/March - May/June and have four stages (instars) that correspond in timing and appearance to the growth of the elm leaves on which they feed:

1st instar - Feeds on buds

2nd instar - Feeds on flowers

3rd instar - Feeds on young leaves

4th instar - Feeds on leaves

The fourth instar is the largest stage at 15 - 16mm and is therefore the most easy to observe. When looking up at elm vegetation keep a keen eye out for shadows of larvae and pupae on the leaves.



The pupa is about 9mm long and is usually found on the underside of a terminal leaf. They can also be found on the midribs of other leaves and sometimes on stems. Pupae can be found from May until July, however left over pupal cases can still be found for a few weeks after the end of the adult flight period.

