

Nature Notes

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Sleeting.



The snow begins to fall at daybreak and continues sporadically throughout the day. For the first two hours it comes down fast and settles thickly, then turns to sleet, then rain, then back to snow. The woods provide a brown-screen backdrop for varieties of wintry precipitation in a moving panorama: snow in small hard grains; gritty rain, seeded with ice, foggy drizzle, then snow in beautiful feathery flakes, falling like down from a burst pillow. The lanes are treacherous with ice over running water, or water over ice in unexpected patches.



Leading the horses down the lane to their field is a hazardous adventure.

There is a flurry of activity on the birdfeeders, and all the while, far-scattered and far-carrying, the carolling of mistle thrushes with their bone-cold bleak-edged singing. Song thrushes were gaining confidence too, with their warmer, short-repeated phrases – and this year, we give them new mantras to sing along to: *Stay safe, stay home! Wear a mask! Wear a mask! Wash your hands, wash your hands ...*



Sleet and slush are not the most romantic subjects to write about. But each creates its own emotional weather with us, existing as the balance point on the see-saw between the excitement of snow and the disappointment of rain – depending on your situation, outlook and what needs to be done. Sleet can

induce feelings of hope, frustration, anxiety and a certain weariness; it is a weather for this long moment in time. What will happen? School or no school? Then, when that is answered, when we will see friends? Parents? Go dancing? Sleet is an unpredictable wobble on the barometer of uncertainty. A weather roulette.

Yet it has its own character, intrigue & beauty. There is a stippled, dappled thick inch of it, salting the farmyard like fish scales.



Two degrees colder, the hill above remains white for nearly three days in its elevated position, whilst those around it remain green. A big holly tree at the snowline seems to play doorman to this other, loftier, icy world. Though intriguingly, the long barrow on the ridge remains snow free.



People have come to sledge on the frozen crust of snow and their shrieks and voices drift down.



I find quieter routes and visit a favourite spot; the 'antlebump tumps' of ancient meadow anthills – the living, insulated, turfed & wild-thymed ant castles on the northern slopes. It is possible to get down the whole hillside using them as stepping stones. Sheep, hares & even short eared owls or small coveys of grey partridge use them as shelter or pillows, as we do (when they are warm with fragrant wild herbs in summer).



Today, sprinkled with remnant snow, they looked like a factory of unsold Christmas puddings. Or a village for the little folk. Or a model of the village that used to exist within the hillfort. Several even had tiny pouting, puffing fungi on top, like smoking chimneys. I love their solid, certain, endurance. Their resilience. The weather app on my phone that forecast snow an hour ago, has once again, turned to rain.

