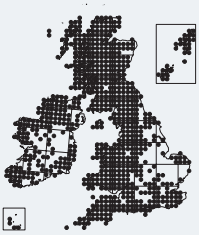
Diplophyllum albicans

White Earwort

Key 31



Identification *D. albicans* is one of the most widespread and abundant of leafy liverworts in Britain. Although its characters are constant (long, round-tipped leaf lobes with a clearly visible band of colourless cells in the middle of each lobe), it possesses an alarming ability to look excitingly different. Luckily, a hand lens is enough to confirm its identity. Moist plants lie flat, but dry leaves curl upwards and inwards over the stem to give a very different appearance. Despite its name, *D. albicans* is only white when dry and dead: it is usually brown or sometimes red, or green in deep shade. Shoots are up to 3.5 mm wide, and may be several centimetres long. Leaves are up to 0.8 mm wide and 1.8 mm long. Clusters of green gemmae quite often form on the tips of leaf lobes. Although dioicous, male plants, perianths and capsules are fairly frequent.

Similar species The band of colourless cells in the middle of each leaf lobe is visible in even the youngest plants. The long, narrow leaf lobes with rounded tips are quite different from those of *Scapania* species (pp. 168–181) or *Douinia ovata* (p. 165). *D. taxifolium* (Paton, p. 340) lacks a band of colourless cells in the middle of each leaf lobe. It is uncommon on acidic ground in the mountains. Fresh, young plants may also resemble *D. obtusifolium* (p. 167), but careful examination will reveal the band of clear cells in *D. albicans*. Very young plants may resemble *Cephaloziella turneri* (p. 107), but that has sharply pointed leaf lobes and a hand lens will reveal strongly toothed leaf margins.

Habitat Most acidic habitats in the north and west are likely to support *D. albicans*. It grows on soil, peat, boulders, rock faces and more rarely on logs, tree stumps or even the base of living trees. It frequently dominates sandstone or shale rock faces in woodland, including old quarry faces, and is equally abundant in block scree, on open cliffs or on exposed soil by forestry tracks. Woodlands in districts with high rainfall can hold *D. albicans*, where it happily colonizes small patches of bare soil on leached boundary banks.

Photos David Holyoak (left) & Sean Edwards (right) Drawing Malcolm Watling Text Sam Bosanquet