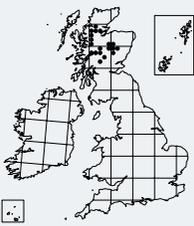


# *Polytrichastrum sexangulare*

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Northern Haircap



**Identification** Small to moderately sized, 1–4 (–8) cm tall plants, dark greenish to brownish, with unbranched, sparsely rhizoidal shoots forming extended, often dense mats, or low loose tufts. The rather rigid leaves are about 7 mm long, straight when moist, and slightly incurved when dry. The plane margins are inrolled above; the leaf tip is blunt or shortly pointed, and somewhat hooded. The nerve, which extends into the tip or is slightly excurrent, bears 30–35 ridges of tissue. The nearly cylindrical capsule is only weakly (4-) 6-angled, has a very indistinct junction between its base and the seta, and a distinctly beaked lid. The capsule is inclined or erect on a 2–3 cm tall, rather stout seta which is yellow to yellowish-red below. Capsules are infrequent except where this moss grows in more sheltered, damp screes.

**Similar species** The somewhat incurved leaves, with a rather blunt, hooded tip are reminiscent of the usually smaller *Oligotrichum hercynicum* (p. 327), which is often a more brightly coloured, orange-red plant, with shorter, more closely appressed, overlapping leaves that have fewer, less pronounced ridges of tissue, and a cylindrical capsule on a delicate seta. *P. alpinum* (p. 318) may grow in abundance near the rarer *P. sexangulare*; in extreme environments it occurs as confusingly similar small forms. These differ in leaf shape, especially the lack of a hooded tip, and in the rounded capsule. *Timmia austriaca* (p. 553) is superficially similar, and may also be found in or by snowbeds, but lacks ridges of tissue on the nerve and has a coarsely toothed, acute leaf tip.

**Habitat** A rare, boreal species of cold climates with a distinctly montane distribution. It is usually found on moist or wet siliceous soils in late-lying snowbeds, or in damp block screes, as well as on banks or under dripping rock faces, in sheltered gullies or by pools and springs. Despite these being cool and wet places, *P. sexangulare* is probably intolerant of heavy shade, although it becomes more luxuriant and frequently fertile in sheltered conditions.

Photos Richard Lansdown (left) & Gordon Rothero (right) Text Fred Rumsey