

Notes from 'Mask Wood'

July 2026

We have reached July in 'Mask Wood', generally regarded to be the height of summer. But in many historic observations of the year's passage, July tends to be characterized by thunderstorms. At the time of writing this month's 'Notes', there had been no Asbeian tempest, unlike the July storms described by Nicholas Breton, an early 17th Century writer – "*Now begins the Canon of heaven to rattle, and when fire is put to the charge, it breaketh out among the Cloudes: the stones of congealed water cut off the eares of Corne: and the blacke stormes affright the faint-hearted*". And exactly two hundred and fifty years ago, the diaries of Gilbert White, to which we often turn, recorded similar destruction: "*July 18th. Loud thunder shower. Mrs Snooke of Ringmer.....had a coach horse killed by this tempest; the horse was at grass just before the house*". Ten days later, on July 31st, "*the lightening beat down a chimney on the Barnet*".

Meanwhile, in the still pacific setting of 'Mask Wood', its flora flourish in the prolonged warmth. Meadowsweet (*Filipendula ulmaria*) is now in fulsome flower. Alongside it, we find prolific growth of Betony (*Stachys officinalis*); another *Leontodon* sp, Autumn Hawkbit, has joined the Rough Hawkbit of last month's 'Notes'; Devil's-bit Scabious (*Succisa pratensis*); Sneezewort (*Achillea ptarmica*); the interestingly-named, and very delicate, Common Mouse-ear (*Cerastium fontanum*), with its tiny, deeply-notched petals; and on the eastern boundary path, a small group of Square-stalked St John's-wort (*Hypericum tetrapterum*).

Richard Mabey reminds us in his 'Flora Britannica' that "*plants have had symbolic as well as utilitarian meanings since the beginning of civilization*" and it is often worth spending a little time to investigate the origin of their names. One would have expected the rather threateningly-named Devil's-bit Scabious to have interesting folkloric connections, but 'Flora Britannica' merely tells us that the name comes from "*the short, bitten-off look of the rootstock*".



Stands of Meadowsweet and Betony, both in Mask Wood

However, the quirky Roy Vickery (who could give Ian Hutchings 'a run for his money' as a Father Christmas lookalike) tells us a little more in his 'Vickery's Folk Flora'. There, he writes that the devil used the plant to practise such power that St Mary the Virgin took from him the means to do so anymore. This made the devil so angry that, in his anger, he bit off the root, which has never grown again.

One of the reasons Asby Tree Group wants to retain glades and open spaces in 'Mask Wood' is to provide suitable habitat for butterflies. On one of July's many sunny days, a number of species were on the wing: Meadow Brown (*Maniola jurtina*); Ringlet (*Aphantopus hyperantus*); Small Copper (*Lycaena phlaeas*); Green-veined White (*Pieris napi*); and Small White (*Pieris rapae*). One of the notoriously pugnacious male Small Coppers was engaged in an aerial 'dogfight' with a passing Meadow Brown. Although Green-veined Whites were quite numerous, to the best of my knowledge, neither of the favoured food-plants of their larvae – Garlic Mustard (*Alliaria petiolata*) and Charlock (*Sinapsis arvensis*) – grows in 'Mask Wood', but both are common and are probably present close by. Unlike the so-called 'Cabbage Whites', the Green-veined has never departed from its ancestral wild food and leaves our vegetables alone. Turning to the other species flying on this July day, the caterpillars of Small Copper can be found on Broad-leaved Dock (*Rumex obtusifolius*), Common Sorrel (*R. acetosa*) and Sheep's Sorrel (*R. acetosella*). Two of these can be found in 'Mask Wood'. The larvae of Meadow Brown have a catholic taste in grass species, and at least three of their food plants were identified in the botanical survey of 'Mask Wood', carried out by Cumbria Wildlife Trust. Another grass, Tufted Hair (*Deschampsia cespitosa*), is used by Ringlet larvae and that also grows in 'Mask Wood'. So, it seems likely that a number of butterfly species could continue to thrive here.

So far, little comment on bird species, although visitors who use 'Merlin', the bird songs and calls identification app, report that Willow Warbler and Redstart are still present. But there are fewer bird sounds as we move towards August, labelled 'the silent month' by ornithologists. The imperative of maintaining breeding territories by strength of song is past, and many birds will also soon be in moult, staying silent lest they attract the attention of predators, at a time when they may be less capable of effective flight.

'Notes' now pauses until it makes its August observations for September's 'Asby Matters'. But perhaps we should look ahead with some caution, for Richard Saunders, in his almanac, 'Apollo Anglicanus', of 1679, wrote thus: "*In August Choler and Melancholy much increase, from whence proceeds long lasting Fevers and Agues not easily cured*". On the other hand, the desired balance of the four bodily humours of ancient medicine (blood, phlegm, choler and melancholy) might be best achieved by a walk around 'Mask Wood'!!

Keith Cooper, July 2026