

NATURE NOTES FROM 'MASK WOOD'

February 2026



This is the first of what is planned to be a series of 'nature-notes' about 'Mask Wood'; Asby Tree Group's 'Community Woodland', being developed with the support of the Braithwaite family. Perhaps fittingly, it is being written at the beginning of an annual cycle, for this is based on a visit to the 'infant' wood on February 17th. By that date, in the Celtic calendar, we would be two weeks into a season of re-birth, beginning on St Brigid's Day on February 2nd. And February 17th, this year, is the eve of the first day of Lent. Doctor Google and Professor Wikipedia will offer you many different opinions about the derivation of that word. But if you want to stick with a 'flesh-and-blood' Professor', perhaps look no further than Ronald Hutton's, *Stations of the Sun: A History of the Ritual Year in Britain*, where the author suggests that the word, 'lenten', derives simply from the lengthening of the daylight.

So, we might hope, today, for some signs of light and rebirth in the wood, but snow-crustrusted tops of the Pennines, seen as I walk up to it, are a reminder that there may be a little way to go before that hope is realised. Nonetheless, one or two birds are in territorial song. As I enter the wood by the bottom gate, a Great Tit is calling; in the north-east corner of the plot, a male Chaffinch is in desultory song; the sound of a 'drumming' Greater Spotted Woodpecker (using the 'instrument' of a tree branch to generate its 'song') drifts from 'Moor Plantation'. Blue Tits are numerous, although not in song, but a Robin is in 'brighter' spring song, having abandoned its more melancholy winter notes. Robin, Great Tit and Blue Tit are all potential users of the many hole-entrance and open-fronted nest boxes in the wood, made by the son of Matthew from the Garage, and put in place by Steve Blenkinsop and Chris Harrington.

In the air above the wood, a pair of Common Buzzards and a pair of Ravens soar. In one of his diary entries for the day of February 17th, made in 1774, the Hampshire naturalist, Gilbert White, recorded that “Ravens begin to build”. They are, indeed, very early nesters, eggs sometimes being laid by mid-February, but not a species we are likely to find nesting in ‘Mask Wood’ – at least not for very many more years! But, close to Great Asby, at the southern end of ‘Marks Close Wood’, between Gaythorne Hall and the cattle-grid at the far end of Sayle Lane, there is a long-established Raven nest-site.

Berries on a Holly on the northern boundary fence have – so far -survived the winter predations of visiting Fieldfare and Redwing, as well as native Mistle Thrush although, on this mid-February morning, there are two Fieldfare moving through shrubs alongside the small water-course which flows from south to north through ‘Mask Wood’, and a pair of Mistle Thrushes fly overhead. There’s still time for predation!

No evidence this morning of other over-wintering bird species that have been sighted here during recent weeks – Woodcock, Goldcrest and (probable) Jack Snipe. Folklore makes a connection between Woodcock and Goldcrest. In the past, few believed that the tiny Goldcrest (Britain’s smallest breeding bird, although many additional birds migrate from Scandinavia to over-winter here) could fly across the North Sea. So, they conjectured that they must travel here on the backs of migrating Woodcock, which make the same journey to join native birds of the species, and arrive at the same time as the Goldcrest influx. Hence the Goldcrest’s folk-name of ‘The Woodcock’s Pilot’.

Little sign of flower growth and bud-break this morning, apart from a tiny rosette of early, frost-encrusted leaves of Primrose. But, hopefully, there may be some flower growth and bud-break to report in March, as well, perhaps, news of the song of one of the first migrants, the Chiffchaff, or ‘Pettichap’ as it was called in the poet John Clare’s local dialect. Yet another poet, Edward Thomas, wrote of the Chiffchaff’s song in his 1914 publication, *In Pursuit of Spring* – “it was here, and at eleven, that I first heard the Chiffchaff saying ‘chiff-chaff, chiff-chaff, chiff-chaff, chiff’.....the small bird’s double-note, almost as regular as the ticking of a clock, though often coming to an end on the first half.”

Keith Cooper, February 18, 2026