

NATURE NOTES FROM 'MASK WOOD'

March 2026



An earlier March visit produced what may be the last sighting, for this season, of a flock of 'Winter Thrushes', Fieldfare and Redwing, unless cold weather conditions over Scotland or North-western Europe cause some 'reverse-migration' of these birds, as they make their way to summer breeding grounds. On that earlier visit, I also heard my first Curlew cry of the year, as a single bird flew high above, going towards the west.

Today, the day after the Equinox, is a day of splendid sunshine and warmth. Many of the infant trees, planted here by Asby Tree Group, are coming into leaf. Amongst them, Hazel, Rowan, Blackthorn and, especially, Bird Cherry. The last of these is the food plant of the larvae of the Bird Cherry Ermine moth (*Yponomeuta evenyemsla*). They feed in dense concentrations beneath a protective web. In past years, some of you may have seen Bird Cherry trees in Asby Gill, covered in these webs. As these 'Mask Wood' trees mature, look out for those webs here, as well. An already established Gorse is in flower, and the delicate purple threads of Ash flowers are beginning to appear. Lesser Celandine can be seen on the footpaths, some with eight petals, others with nine or more. One of the larger, many-named Goat Willows – also known as Pussy Willow and Great Sallow - is 'alive' with insects, feeding on its catkins. This tree species, which relies heavily on insects for pollination, is one of the most important early food sources for pollinators in northern climates. On the Willow's lower branches, there are many Honeybees; on the higher branches, Tree Bumblebees (*Bombus hypnorum*). This species, on the wing from as early as February, has spread very rapidly since first arriving in the United Kingdom early **this** century. It is now found throughout the country; the Cumbria Bumblebee Atlas

records its presence all around us – Orton, Ormside, Ravestonedale – and now it is here, in ‘Mask Wood’. Fitting that a ‘Tree Group’ project should be visited by Tree Bumblebees! Distinctive appearance – ginger-brown top to the thorax, followed by a black abdomen and a white tail. And *B. hypnorum* may be another competitor for use of the nest-boxes on the mature trees here; don’t be surprised if you see bees going back and forth to a nest constructed in one of these boxes!

Back to birds. No evidence yet of summer migrant species within ‘Mask Wood’. But a Greater Spotted Woodpecker ‘drums’, high in a particularly resonant Oak, close to the small water-course, producing an almost metallic note. It flies off in the direction of ‘Moor Plantation’. A Dunnock – a bird with as many names as the Goat Willow, for it also known as Hedge Sparrow and Hedge Accentor – moves furtively through dense bramble growth on the southern boundary. A furtive, unobtrusive bird, but one with a staggeringly complex and bizarre sex-life, revealed by Professor Nick Davies’ detailed study of the Dunnock population in Cambridge University’s Botanic Garden. In 1856, the Reverend Francis Orpen Morris (himself a pioneering ornithologist) encouraged his Yorkshire congregation to follow the example of the “humble and homely” Dunnock. Little did he know of the chaos this would have brought to his Parish! In the bramble patch, a Wren skulks. Another bird with an interesting mating, or *pre*-mating, habit. The Wren is polygynous and the male builds surplus nests (often referred to as ‘cock’ nests), the female selects one for breeding and adds the nest lining. The Millom poet, Norman Nicholson, chronicles the construction and, sadly, eventual non-use of one of these nests in his 1968 poem, ‘The Cock’s Nest’.

As I leave ‘Mask Wood’, I can hear that the ‘drumming’ woodpecker has returned to his signal station, but is struggling to find the metallic sharpness of his earlier tattoo! A pause now until April, about which the poet T S Eliot sounded a cautionary note, calling it “the cruellest month”. But in those opening lines to ‘The Waste Land’, Eliot subverts the first lines of the General Prologue of Chaucer’s, *The Canterbury Tales*. So, let’s stick with the optimism of Chaucer’s original words, “When that Aprille with his shoures soote/The droghte of March hath perced to the roote/And bathed every veyne in swich licour/Of which vertu engendred is the flour”

Keith Cooper, March 22, 2026