

NATURE NOTES FROM 'MASK WOOD'

May 2026

Last month's Notes ended with the words of John Clare, heralding the arrival of May. On a May visit to 'Mask Wood', it is another symbolic arrival that takes my eye. Not within the planted woodland, but in the air above it – my first Asby Common Swift (*Apus apus*) of the year. So, I begin May's Notes with the words of another poet, Ted Hughes, written in 1976, as he celebrates the arrival of this summer visitor and what it means to his community: "*Fifteenth of May. Cherry blossom the swifts/Materialise at the tip of a long scream/Of needle. 'Look! They're back! Look!'/And they're gone/On a steep/Controlled scream of skid/.....They've made it again,/Which means the globe's still working, the Creation's/Still waking refreshed, our summer's/Still all to come*". Sadly, it is no longer possible to share Hughes' optimism that the return of Swifts "*means that the globe's still working*", when so much of it is clearly not working, struggling with the predation of Sapiens, the rapacious ape. Nonetheless, I still find myself saying, "Look! They're back! Look!" Now, Common Swifts appear to nest in only two Great Asby properties, so if you have a two-storey north-facing elevation, do consider fitting a nest -box for them. More information at [Swift Boxes - Peak Boxes](#) and from Penrith Swifts Group, contact susanrowlands1@hotmail.co.uk. Too late for this year's nesting birds, but this year's offspring will check out possible future nest-sites before they depart in August.

Back at ground level – or just a little above it – on two of my May visits, I observed a pair of Long-tailed Tits, so they may have selected a nest-site somewhere within the bounds of 'Mask Wood'. Strictly speaking, not actually a tit species and most certainly not a nest-box user, as many will know. Instead, they build a large domed structure, composed of moss, bound with spiders' web and hair, coated outside with lichen and thickly lined with an astonishing number of feathers. This bird is the poet John Clare's, 'bumbarrel', and in his poem, *Bumbarrel's Nest*, he describes what is built: "*Of mosses grey with cobwebs closely tied/ And warm and rich as feather-bed within*".

Flower buds of Hawthorn (*Crataegus monogyna*) are beginning to break. There are mixed views about the scent of its flowers. Vickery's Folk Flora tells us that "*Trimethylamine, one of first products formed when animal tissues start to decay, is present in hawthorn flowers*". Sylvia Plath echoes this in her 1961 poem, *Whitsun*,

when she writes, “*we picnic in the death-stench of a hawthorn*”. But the flowers also made up the garlands with which ‘May Queens’ were crowned, and the Cambridge anthropologist, Jack Goody, was certainly thinking of something other than death, when he wrote of the flowers’ association “*with unregulated love in the fields, rather than conjugal love in the bed*”!

As well as emerging Hawthorn flowers, Hawthorn Flies, or St Mark’s Flies (*Bibio marci*) have also emerged, and the air is quite heavy with them. Chris Harrington, busy strimming the ‘Mask Wood’ footpaths, draws my attention to them. He is a keen angler, and that gives him his knowledge of these insects. In *Waterlog*, the nature writer, Roger Deakin, describes them thus: “*They are top-heavy insects, with a thorax like an old Dragon Rapide biplane and a body that tapers to nothing. Their flight is jerky, uncertain...[and] aimless*”. The larvae live in the soil and decaying matter. They have the name, St Mark’s Fly, because adults begin to appear around St Mark’s Day (April 21). According to *Bugs Britannica* (and Chris), after emergence, they are “wolfed down by trout, and on the days when [they are] swarming, some anglers swear by an imitation fly called ‘Bibio’”.

On one warm day, both male and female Orange-Tip butterflies (*Anthocharis cardamines*) were on the wing. One male was resting on a Common Dog Violet – perhaps recovering body warmth after a rather cold night – revealing the rather beautiful green-mottled underside of its hindwings, which acts as camouflage when the insect is at rest on, say, umbellifer flowerheads. Perhaps Cuckoo Flower (*Cardamine pratensis*) is the most important food plant within ‘Mask Wood’ for the larvae of this species.

Two hundred and fifty years ago, the naturalist Gilbert White made a rather bleak diary entry about June: June 8, 1776 – “*Hardly any shell snails are seen; they were destroyed, & eaten by the thrushes last summer during the long dry season. This year scarce a thrush, they were killed by the severe weather.*” Let us hope I can write a ‘brighter’ note about next month!

Keith Cooper