

NatureNotes



Rupert Evershed's monthly diary of the natural world
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Let your imagination run wild in the woods!

If you go down to the woods today...you will probably be greeted with an almost absolute silence. If it is a still winter's day, stepping into a wood or forest has the effect of hushing the senses. The wide perspective of open spaces is shut down and while a consciousness of a vast and deep expanse remains, trees obscure the sightlines and close in overhead to leave only glimpses through trunks and rides. Voices sound louder in woods and we are apt to lower ours and become part of the silence too.

My vista, when out in the woods recently, was of a dull, grey-brown blended backdrop of trees and bush branches punctuated every now and then by the dark green of a yew or holly. It is a vision of the eternal and the ageing: the woodland stripped of its green youthful vigour, stands like a great mausoleum: a monument to what remains after summer has gone.

But evergreens – yew, ivy, holly and pine – stand as embodiments of eternal youth watching over the fallen leaves and the broken branches. The bone-white trunks of young silver birch provide a skeletal definition to the scene and wherever the light breaks through, the drapes of Old Man's Beard provide a solemnity to the moment.

It is not hard to see, or at least feel, why woods have been places of liminality in folklore for centuries – portals between the here and now and the magical and eternal. How often in fairy tales, both old and new, the hero must go into the woods and there invariably discover a world of danger, of magic, transformation and enchantment. Walk deep into the woods and the paring back of vision and the heightening of senses combine with childhood fairytale folklore to fire the imagination.

One of my favourite childhood authors was the naturalist and illustrator Denys Watkins-Pitchford, known as 'BB', who penned his popular children's books about the last four gnomes in England in the dark days of World War II. The Little Grey



The long-tailed tit (*Aegithalos caudatus* - a woodland sprite!).

Picture: STEVE ROUND.

Men and its sequel, *Down the Bright Stream*, followed the gnomes' adventures along a woodland stream – the Folly brook – and invited readers into the intimacy of the real natural world mixed with make-believe. Needless to say, his books provided a welcome ray of warmth in the wartime gloom and have continued to captivate readers ever since.

Believing in BB's 'Little People' might be a stretch too far for you but letting your imagination run wild can be no bad thing at this time of year when the magic of Christmas and the resolution of New Year have faded. Hopes, dreams and aspirations can find themselves bleakly returning to the norm. A walk deep into a wood might just reinvigorate a sense of enchantment with everyday life whether the forest is enchanted or not!

For me, some of that enchantment can come from the wildlife of the wood itself. Wait in the wood for a while and eventually the silence will be broken, distantly at first, but growing ever clearer, by the sound of small birds making their way through the woodland in a busy foraging band. At first only one or two of these birds are heard, maybe a coal tit or a long-tailed tit, but as the flock approaches the trees and undergrowth around comes alive with a feeding party of tiny birds.

Moving through the trees

like woodland sprites the arrival of a tit flock brightens the darkest corner of any wood. Great tits, blue tits, coal tits and long-tailed tits are often joined by nuthatches, treecreepers, woodpeckers and goldcrests too. It often feels as if the group has sought me out and for a moment energises the spot where I stand with colour and calls amidst a non-stop movement of tiny warm, feather-clad balls of flesh and blood. But as fast as they appeared they are gone, through the woodland, out of sight and eventually out of hearing too.

They are part of the magic of winter woods and never fail to delight. Such flocks can be found on the harshest of days, their vitality testament to the wisdom of banding together in a tight flock of mixed species to survive the elements.

This weekend sees the RSPB's annual Big Garden Birdwatch, now in its 40th year! If you aren't able to get down to the woods today maybe the roving flock of woodland sprites will visit your garden to get you reaching for your pen and notepad as they flit to and forth bringing their own sense of enchantment to your humble bird table.

Visit the RSPB website at www.rspb.org.uk where you can sign up to take part and find lots of helpful tips on identifying any woodland sprites that visit your garden!