Parish Magazine Article August 2024

Horse Chestnut by Michael Blencowe for Sussex Wildlife Trust

Far, far away in the south-east corner of Europe, the Balkan Mountains tower over the landscape. Their valleys were once home to the fearsome Thracian tribes, who made empires tremble when they rode screaming into battle on their wild horses. But even more ancient battles were being fought deep in these majestic mountains.

Here in the Balkans, there grew a strange and mighty tree. Its huge seeds were encased in spiky armour and its leaves were like giant hands which cast shade all around. But this tree had been cursed. Each year a plague of tiny moths would attack the tree, their caterpillars would burrow inside every leaf. Green leaves turned to brown, leaving the tree apparently lifeless and defeated. Yet each year the tree would return with renewed green vigour, and each year the moths would attack with the same resolve. And so, for centuries the tree and the moth remained trapped in the Balkan Mountains, locked in their epic, age-old battle.

Then one day men came from the west, discovered this magnificent tree, gathered its seeds and planted them in their world. And so it was that the branches and the empire of the Horse Chestnut spread across Europe’s parks and gardens. People admired it and reclined in the shade of its broad palmate leaves. Schoolboys used its seeds to fight their own playground battles. The conker tree had conquered the continent. Here in this new world the curse of the moth had been lifted and the Horse Chestnut flourished. Meanwhile, the tree’s nemesis, not a particularly strong flyer, remained imprisoned in the remote valleys of the Balkan Mountains for centuries, more myth than moth. Then, one day, the modern world arrived. Construction workers building roads through the mountains were unwittingly building the perfect means for the moth to escape and spread. Now all it needed was a lift. So, the moth stuck out its six thumbs and hitched a ride.

Incredibly, the moth, just 5mm long, was able to disperse by grabbing on to passing vehicles. And so, like the ferocious Thracian tribes, the moth rode into battle. Screaming along highways, motorways, and autobahns on Volvos, Citroens, Fiats and Fords. The ancient battle spilled out from the Balkans as the moth was chauffeur driven to every Horse Chestnut tree in Europe. The Horse Chestnut Leaf Miner moth was first discovered, identified and named in Greece in 1984. Twenty years later, in 2004, an innocent motorist pulled off the A27 in to the University of Sussex car park, unaware they had brought a sinister stowaway into Sussex. Since then, every Horse Chestnut in Sussex has been moth-eaten. Look to the leaves and you’ll see the great Balkan battle raging right on your doorstep.

Ends

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