

August 1, 2006

## Summer Becoming Fall

Henry David Thoreau, the great American naturalist and philosopher, once observed “how early in the year it begins to be late.” How true this is. Despite weather which is often hot and sultry, August delivers each year the first real signs of fall. The frantic plant growth and animal activity of spring and early summer have now been replaced by an almost lazy feeling of calm. The avian and amphibian choruses of only a few weeks ago have mostly fallen silent and given way to a more gentle orchestra of cicadas, grasshoppers and crickets. Bird migration is already under way, the first leaves are beginning to change colour and roadsides will soon be transformed by a yellow cloak of goldenrod.

Despite the premonitions of summer’s end, August is still very much a month to be savoured. Among the month’s delights are the delicious taste of fresh corn and tomatoes, the calming sight of misty dawns, the often clear, cool nights illuminated by the Milky Way and the sound of snowy tree crickets calling in perfect unison as we fall asleep.

With late August comes the anticipation of bright, cool September weekends and the riot of leaf colour that is just around the corner. In a cultural sense, August is much more the end of the year than is December. With Labour Day, our lives begin anew as school reconvenes and countless community activities begin again.

As with each month, the following almanac provides an overview of the events in our flora, fauna, weather and sky that are typical of August. The dates, of course, can change somewhat from one year to the next, depending on the vagaries of the weather. The general order of events should remain the same, however. The box in front of each date can be used to check off the events that you witness.

\_\_\_ 1 Blue jays once again become quite vocal. Along with the “lisping” of cedar waxwings, the calls of jays are typical August bird sounds.

\_\_\_ 2 However, other than the sporadic singing of a handful of species such as red-eyed vireos, northern cardinals, mourning doves, peewees and song sparrows, most bird song - as opposed to calls - has ceased.

\_\_\_ 3 Some of the interesting wildflowers plants that bloom in early August include woodland sunflower, turtlehead, and large-leaved aster. Petroglyphs Provincial Park is a good destination for botanizing.

\_\_\_ 4 Leopard frogs wander en masse from their wetland habitat to invade nearby fields. They feed heavily on the bounty of insects to be found there.

\_\_\_ 5 Queen Anne’s lace continues to dominate roadsides.

\_\_\_ 6 The electric, buzzing sound of the cicada makes the mid-day heat seem even hotter.

\_\_\_ 7 At this time of year, the “Dog Star,” Sirius, rises in the southeast just before the sun. Because its appearance often coincides with the hottest days of summer, this period became known as the “Dog Days” of summer.

\_\_\_ 8 Water levels often drop in late summer, revealing emergent shorelines. These sites are worth exploring for interesting plants such as bladderworts.

\_\_\_ 9 Underwing moths, named for the bright colours of the underwings, are easy to find in August. You can actually attract them by spreading a bait concoction on tree trunks and checking it after dark. Try a mixture of stale beer, mashed bananas, molasses and a shot of rum!

\_\_\_ 10 Large groups of loons are sometimes seen on the bigger lakes. 10 or more birds often come together in these “convocations” and appear to talk to each other in chuckles and clucks. The gatherings would therefore appear to have a social function.

\_\_\_ 11 Green frogs and gray tree frogs may continue to call sporadically during the day. However, these calls never amount to a full chorus.

\_\_\_ 12 The Perseid meteor shower peaks on August 12. Even with an almost full moon this year, it should

still be possible to see a dozen meteors an hour.

\_\_\_ 13 If you're out walking along our rail-trails or gravel roads, watch for Carolina locusts. With their yellow-bordered wings and the crackling sound they make as they fly, they are hard to miss.

\_\_\_ 14 In August and throughout the fall, family groups of otters can often be seen feeding and frolicking in quiet lakes including Lily Lake just west of Peterborough.

\_\_\_ 15 A profusion of ripe wild fruits can be found on various shrubs and small trees such as chokecherry, raspberry, Virginia creeper, elderberry and blueberry.

\_\_\_ 16 Red maples along the edges of lakes and wetlands are the first trees to show splashes of fall colour. Virginia creeper and staghorn sumac may also show colour change.

\_\_\_ 17 Bald-faced hornets, the wasp species that makes the globe-shaped paper nests in trees, are common. It is black with yellowish-white markings on the face and should be treated with respect.

\_\_\_ 18 Ragweed is in bloom. The pollen from its tiny green flowers sets off the beginning of another hayfever season. Goldenrod is not the culprit!

\_\_\_ 19 Monarch butterfly numbers are usually at their highest by about now. Yellow sulphur butterflies are also quite common, especially over fields of alfalfa.

\_\_\_ 20 Songbird migration is in full swing, with numerous warblers moving through. By making a "pish" sound, you should be able to draw the birds in and get good views. I have the most luck along wooded cottage roads and at any time of day. If you hear chickadees, you are almost certain to find warblers with them.

\_\_\_ 21 Small dragonflies known as meadowhawks become very common. In most species, the males are red and the females are yellow.

\_\_\_ 22 If you're lucky, you may see flocks of migrating nighthawks in late afternoon or early evening.

\_\_\_ 23 A large variety of mammals gorge themselves on late summer fruit and nuts. Bears are especially fond of beech nuts and sometimes leave large piles of broken branches high in the beech trees where they've been feeding.

\_\_\_ 24 The soft, rhythmic "treet...treet...treet" of snowy tree crickets is a common sound in parts of Peterborough. Sounding almost like a gentle-voiced spring peeper, this is the insect you often hear calling in campfire scenes in Westerns. By counting the number of chirps in seven seconds and adding five, you can make an accurate estimation of the temperature in degrees Celsius.

\_\_\_ 25 Milkweeds attract a huge variety of insects including tuft-covered milkweed tussock moth caterpillars and the red and black milkweed bug. Now is also the best time to look for the yellow and black larvae of the monarch butterfly.

\_\_\_ 26 Yellowjacket wasps are usually very conspicuous by now. In late summer, there is usually a frenetic search for food to feed the larvae in their underground nests, hence their attraction to garbage cans and family picnics.

\_\_\_ 27 Goldenrods reach peak bloom at month's end and take over as the main roadside and field flowers. Some fields appear almost totally yellow.

\_\_\_ 28 Starting in late summer, listen for coyotes calling. Their "yip-yip" calls are often heard at this time as pups, now in their adolescence, begin to try out their voices.

\_\_\_ 29 Heavy morning mists, especially in valleys and over lakes, complement the beauty of the August sunrise.

\_\_\_ 30 Orion, the main constellation of winter, is now visible one hour before dawn on the eastern horizon.

\_\_\_ 31 The eggs of all our turtle species hatch from late August to early October. In the case of painted turtles, the young may actually stay in the nest and not emerge above ground until the following spring.

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