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# LIVING

# Colour's last hurrah

*October's poplars are flaming torches lighting the way to winter.*

— *Nova Bair*

A time of intense colours, exceptional bird activity, invigorating cooler days and the tangy smell of fallen leaves, October is high on most people's list of favourite times of year. The month is ushered in by beautiful weather and flaming leaves of red, orange, and yellow. However, October's charm needs to be enjoyed now, because it is both fragile and fleeting. By month's end, the landscape will fade to one of mostly greys, browns and pale yellows, punctuated here and there by the greens of conifers and the smoky gold of tamarack.

## OUR CHANGING SEASONS

Drew Monkman

The events listed below constitute an almanac of key happenings in the natural world in October. Some events can occur over the entire month, while others are more restricted in time. The dates, therefore, are only an approximation. As we've seen with this summer's intense heat and lack of rain, the vagaries of the weather can have a huge influence on when certain events take place.

□ 1 With the drought we've experienced this summer and fall, most colour change and leaf drop have been occurring much earlier than usual. Trees have been shedding their leaves early in order to conserve water. The leaves are sacrificed so the tree can use water to store carbohydrates needed to survive. Water is lost to the air through their leaves by transpiration.

□ 2 Sparrow and waterfowl migration take centre stage this month. Large, high-altitude flocks of Canada geese heading for the Tennessee Valley pass over early in the month. White-throated and white-crowned sparrows, along with dark-eyed juncos, are common at backyard feeders.

□ 3 Coyotes are quite vocal throughout the fall and can often be heard calling at night right on the edge of Peterborough. To me at least, their calls are a reminder that the beauty and mystery of the natural world can still be experienced right from your own backyard.

□ 4 As the goldenrods quickly fade away, asters dominate the wildflower show this month. The white flowers of heath, panicked, and calico asters are everywhere, as are the purple blossoms of New England asters. A little further north, blue-violet heart-leaved aster is common. Newcomb's Wildflower Guide (Little, Brown and Company) will help you sort out this confusing genus of flowers.

□ 5 This is usually the month of the first killing frosts and the first strenuous scraping of the car windshield. With climate change, however, all bets are off.

□ 6 If you are out before sunrise, take a moment to admire Venus, shining high in the east. This whitish planet is far brighter than any star.

□ 7 Watch and listen for mixed flocks of golden-crowned and ruby-crowned kinglets, brown creepers, juncos, sparrows, and late-leaving warblers like the yellow-rumped. These flocks can be especially common along rail-trails. The section of trail between Hilliard and Cumberland streets is particularly good for bird activity.

□ 8 Red-backed salamanders are born in late summer and early fall. The species is fairly easy to find at this time of year. Look under flat rocks, patio stones, and logs, especially in dampish, forested areas and around cottages.

□ 9 On an average year, colours are at their height about now. However, this year, peak colour was much earlier due to the extremely dry conditions.

□ 10 The signature constellation of fall is Pegasus and its asterism, the Great Square. Adjacent to the square is the Andromeda

*October's fragile, fleeting charm needs to be enjoyed now*



Clockwise, from top: A dark-eyed junco, rough-legged hawk, golden-crowned kinglet and a long-tailed duck.

constellation and the Andromeda galaxy. Our closest galactic neighbour, it appears through binoculars like a faint oval of fuzzy light — light that left the galaxy two million years ago!

□ 11 One of the many things I enjoy about fall is the often hazy, dream-like quality of the light. With the sun being lower in the sky, the angle of the light is different than in summer. There is often considerable humidity in the air, too. These factors combine to create a feeling of reverie.

□ 12 Flocks of giant Canada geese (the subspecies that nests in the Kawarthas), ring-billed gulls, red-winged blackbirds, American crows, and American robins are widespread.

□ 13 Using its antlers, the buck white-tailed deer makes scrapes in the leaf litter on the forest floor in preparation for the upcoming rut. It then urinates on its hind legs in such a way that the urine runs over special "hock" glands and carries the scent down to the scrape. Female deer visit these scrapes.

□ 14 On balmy October days, male ruffed grouse can sometimes be heard drumming. This is also the grouse's "crazy season" in which young birds disperse from their parent's territory and sometimes fly into walls, fences, windows, and just about any other obstacle imaginable. There is some evidence that they may actually become intoxicated on fermented berries!

□ 15 At sunset tonight, watch for the thin, waxing crescent moon low in the western sky. If you look between the two tips of the crescent, you'll see a ghostly image of the full moon. This phenomenon is called Earthshine. Light from the sun reflects off the Earth, onto the moon, and then back to our eyes. Earthshine is best about two days after the new moon.

□ 16 Mid- through late October is very much a time of yellows. Among the many players are the trembling aspen, bigtooth aspen, balsam poplar, Norway maple, silver maple, white birch, willows and, at month's end, tamarack.

□ 17 Indian summer usually occurs sometime in October in the Kawarthas. The term refers to a period of three or more warm,

sunny days after the first hard frost (-2 C).

□ 18 Right now is the heart of the mating season for porcupines. By raising her tail over her back, the female allows the male to mate with her but yet avoid "the perils of pincushion sex" as Tim Tiner calls it in *Up North Day Book* 1995.

□ 19 Spring peepers are sometimes heard calling in the fall from the forest habits they call home outside of the breeding season. They are most vocal on warm, damp days. However, this fall calling is sporadic in nature and does not result in breeding activity.

□ 20 Migrating diving ducks stop over on our larger lakes such as Pigeon and Rice. Goldeneye, scaup and mergansers are most common, but small numbers of scoters and long-tailed ducks sometimes turn up as well.

□ 21 Unlike the bumper crop of 2006, most coniferous and deciduous trees throughout the province have had very poor seed crops this year. It is therefore expected that most of our winter finches will leave Ontario this fall in search of food elsewhere. One exception is the pine grosbeak. According to Ron Pittaway of the Ontario Field Ornithologists, there's a good chance that these beautiful finches will soon begin to show up in the Kawarthas in search of the fruit of ornamental crabapple trees and European mountain ash. Unlike most other species, these trees have produced fairly good crops this year.

□ 22 You can get a real sense right now of just how many of our city trees and shrubs are non-native. Because they are still mostly green and fully-leaved, they stick out like sore thumbs. Norway maple, lilac, weeping willow and European buckthorn are especially noticeable.

□ 23 Deer mice seek out winter accommodation and, to the dismay of many, human habitations are often chosen. In our neighbourhood at least, mice have been showing up in houses since mid summer, and in large numbers!

□ 24 Turtles are seen only rarely after mid-October. The shorter days and weaker fall sun do not provide sufficient warmth to raise their body temperature to a point where they

can catch and digest food. Many therefore begin hibernation.

□ 25 The "fall turn-over" begins to re-oxygenate lakes this month. As the surface waters cool, they begin to mix with the uniformly-cold lower layers, thereby providing the entire lake with a big breath of air. At times, the mixing even brings dead weeds to the surface and the water can become murky for a few days.

□ 26 The full moon of October is known as the Hunter's Moon. Because there is no long period of darkness between sunset and moonrise around the time of the full moon in September and October, this "bonus of light" helped hunters to track their prey well into the evening.

□ 27 Rough-legged hawks from Nunavut and the Northwest Territories are passing through the Kawarthas. This large, usually dark hawk frequents open farmland and often hovers as it searches for small rodents.

□ 28 If you want to get a head start on winter sky-watching, it is now possible to see the Orion constellation towering over the southern sky in the early morning darkness.

□ 29 Red squirrels can be seen nipping off cone-bearing twigs on evergreen trees. These "nip twigs" are scattered all over the ground. Along with other provisions such as mushrooms, the cones are stored as winter food.

□ 30 The smoky, golden-yellow of tamaracks is the final act in the annual fall pageant of tree colour.

□ 31 Mid to late October sees the arrival of northern shrikes, migrating south from the Arctic. Shrikes are well known for their habit of impaling prey items such as mice and small birds on thorns or barbed wire. Since today is Halloween, such macabre behaviour seems strangely appropriate.

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