

LIVING

# Transition from summer to fall

## Allergies, bird migration, reduced sunshine and the changing leaves

Although the calendar tells us that the official start of fall is still three weeks away, a sense of the new season is already upon us. The year is turning the corner from the dizzying growth of spring and summer to the maturity of autumn.



Drew Monkman  
OUR CHANGING SEASONS

Summer's slipping away can be seen in the shorter evenings and in the yellow surf of goldenrod that blankets fields; it can be felt in the cool, misty dawns and in the itchy eyes and throats of hayfever sufferers; it can be smelt in windfall apples and rank, over-grown vegetation; and it can be heard in the calls of the blue jay and the incessant chorus of insect love songs. There is a sense of completeness now in the bounty of the natural world as trees and shrubs hang heavy with seeds and fruit. The promise of harvest, made by the flowers of May and June and the long, hot sunny days of July and August, has been kept.

But let's not get ahead of ourselves; this is not autumn quite yet. September is only a bridge between the seasons. Hot, humid days are still commonplace, and a swim in the lake still feels pretty much the way it did a month ago. There is still summer out there to be enjoyed, but it is a melancholy joy for summer's days are numbered.

Almost without our knowing it, most of our migrant birds will leave this month. Listening to their calls in the night sky, we can't help but feel a certain sadness at their departure as well as concern for their welfare. But we are watching their progress southward with even more trepidation than usual this year, since many species will be passing through the Gulf of Mexico where the worst oil spill in U.S. history recently occurred.

The Gulf Coast is a globally important stopover area for many bird species. There was concern that the spill would not be contained before fall migration and that storms might move large volumes of oil into critical bird habitats such as beaches and wetlands. According to Bird Studies Canada (BSC), however, the catastrophic worst-case scenarios have not materialized. Jon McCracken, BSC's Director of National Programs, feels that, "While we probably won't know the full environmental impact for several years, there is every indication that most Canadian bird species narrowly dodged a bullet, at least in terms of direct oiling."

Although each September sees the same changes, the exact timetable is never quite the same. This is even more so this year with the record-breaking

temperatures we've been experiencing since January.

So, let the following dates of this September almanac serve only as an approximate guide to the events of the month, and don't be surprised if many happenings occur earlier or later than what is considered normal. We had better get used to it, because in a changing climate, this kind of uncertainty will be the way of the future.

1. Fall songbird migration is at its peak. Watch and listen for warblers and vireos in both country and city backyards. They are most often in the company of chickadees. The migrants are usually hidden by foliage, however, and will need some pishing – taking a deep breath and rapidly repeating the word "pish" in one drawn-out exhale – to be coaxed out into the open.

2. The wild fruit crop is especially abundant this year. Oaks, maples, elderberries, dogwoods and mountain-ash are but a few of the species offering up an extra big serving of acorns, seeds, and berries to hungry birds and mammals.

3. Robins begin to flock up. A dozen or more can often be seen feeding together on lawns. Young birds with speckled breasts are usually quite conspicuous in these gatherings.

4. Large mating swarms of flying ants are a common September phenomenon, especially on warm, humid afternoons. Some are females – the potential future queens – but the majority are males.

5. The most typical bird sound of September is the rasping call of the blue jay. With no apparent cause, a lone bird will often begin to sound off, seemingly for the pure joy of making noise.

6. Canada goldenrod transforms fields into a sea of yellow. Goldenrod attracts huge numbers of insects and provides excellent opportunities for close-up bug watching. Don't forget your camera.

7. Gentians, a radiant blue flower of late summer, are in bloom. The Trans-Canada Trail just east of Highway 7 is a good place to see them. Dainty, white ladies'-tresses orchids can also be found here.

8. Monarchs are now heading south to the mountains of western Mexico where they will spend the winter. Many will go to the El Rosario Sanctuary near the town of Anganguero. The number of monarch butterflies wintering in Mexico plummeted last winter but thanks to a hot, sunny summer, populations appear to have rebounded, at least here in central Ontario.

9. Although the song of the cicada fades away early in the month, ground crickets, field crickets, tree crickets, and bush-katyds continue to call fervently. As temperatures become cooler, however, the amount of evening song decreases noticeably.

10. Baby turtles are hatching and can



DREW MONKMAN photo

sometimes be seen crossing local rail-trails.

11. The sun sets at about 7:30 p.m., a full hour earlier than just a month ago. Sunrise is just before 7 a.m.

12. Virginia creeper turns a fiery red or deep burgundy.

13. Two species of white-flowered vines are very much in evidence right now, especially along woodland edges where they sprawl over fences, shrubs and trees. They are wild cucumber, which develop into roundish, cucumber-like seed pods covered in soft bristles, and Virgin's bower, identified by its distinctive, fluffy seedheads of gray, silky plumes.

14. Mushrooms are at their most plentiful and diverse in late summer and fall, especially when the weather becomes cooler and there is sufficient rainfall. Mushrooms are the fruiting bodies of fungi in the same way that flowers are the fruiting bodies of plants.

15. Ruby-throated hummingbirds abandon our feeders and surrender to the urge to migrate. Most ruby-throats winter in Mexico's Yucatan Peninsula and in Central America. The southward flight includes a remarkable non-stop crossing of the Gulf of Mexico, taking 18-20 hours.

16. Although the purpose of their song is for another season, spring peep-

DREW MONKMAN photo  
The dogwood (above), goldenrod (left) and the calls of the Blue Jay are all signs that fall is on its the way.



KARL EGRESSY photo

ers and gray treefrogs test their voices by calling sporadically from woodland trees.

17. In mid-September, the first sub-freezing temperatures are traditionally recorded along with the first frost. In light of climate change, it will be interesting to see when the first frost occurs this year.

18. Brown and black woolly bear caterpillars are a common sight on roads, sidewalks and trails. People used to believe that the longer the middle brown band was, the shorter and milder the winter would be.

19. Be sure to put your bird feeders up if you haven't already done so. If you scatter black oil sunflower seed on the ground, you should be able to attract white-throated sparrows, which are migrating through our area right now.

20. On cool mornings, fog and mist form over wetlands, rivers, lakes and valleys. Land and water surfaces that have warmed up during the summer are still evaporating a lot of water into the

atmosphere. The moisture condenses into water droplets when it comes into contact with the cool, early morning air.

21. Jupiter will be at its closest approach to Earth and as big and bright as it gets in the night sky. A medium-sized telescope should be sufficient to see some of the details in Jupiter's cloud bands.

22. The fall equinox takes place this evening at 11:09 p.m. marking the beginning of autumn. Today, both the moon and sun rise due east and set due west. By taking note of where the sun rises and sets as seen from an east and west window in your house, you can watch as sunrise and sunset points move increasingly southward over the course of the fall.

23. The Harvest Moon, the full moon closest to the fall equinox, occurs today. For several evenings in a row, the moon rises at almost the same time and seems to linger on the horizon as it follows a shallow angle up into the sky.

24. Large numbers of turkey vultures are often seen as they soar southward.

25. The webs of the fall webworm, a member of the tiger moth family, stand out noticeably. The large, loose webs encase the ends of the branches of broad-leaved trees and house colonies of small, beige caterpillars, which will become white moths in the spring.

26. Although bird song is usually absent in the fall, some species will utter a half-hearted, tentative song on bright September mornings. Robins, meadowlarks, purple finches, and white-throated sparrows are among those sometimes heard.

27. The purples, mauves, and whites of asters now reign supreme in fields and along roadsides and represent the year's last offering of wildflowers. The most common species include New England, heath and panicked asters.

28. The appearance on lawns of the shaggy mane mushroom is a sure sign of fall.

29. Most years, white ash, pin cherry, and staghorn sumac reach their colour peak about now. Some ash trees turn a stunning purple-bronze that literally glows in the September sun.

30. Ospreys leave the Kawarthas for their wintering grounds in the West Indies and Central and South America. Mangroves, rainforests and coastal estuaries will be their home until next spring.

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