

## localnews

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## LIVING

## Nature sings September song

Nasty biters are gone, humidity drops . . . so get out and enjoy the autumn show

And all the day the blue jay calls throughout the autumn lands.

-William Wilfred Campbell

Although the calendar tells us that fall's official start is still more than three weeks away, a sense of the new season is already upon us. It is there in the spectacle of goldenrod-gold covering fields and roadsides and in the energy we feel as cooler weather frees us from summer lethargy. The absence of biting insects, too, signals the change of seasons and makes this a great time to get out walking once again and to admire September's many achievements. The bounty that was only a promise back in May can now be seen in the extraordinary growth put on by young trees, tasted in the ripe fruits and vegetables of the farmers' market, smelled in the dense vegetation bordering a quiet stream and heard in the contact calls of young blue jays winging their way southward for the first time.



Drew Monkman

OUR CHANGING SEASONS

But let's not get ahead of ourselves; this is not autumn quite yet. September is only a bridge between the seasons. And, although each year sees the same changes, the exact timetable is never the same. This is the case more than ever before as our rapidly warming climate delays the onset of some events in nature, hastens others and may even explain the arrival of some new actors on the scene such as the giant swallowtail butterfly.

## MONARCHS RULE

**1.** - Monarch butterfly numbers are at their highest. Monarchs are now congregating at peninsulas on the Great Lakes such as Presqu'île Provincial Park, a jumping off point for their migration across Lake Ontario and on to Mexico. A monarch tagging demonstration is being held from 1 pm to 3 pm Sept. 1 and 2 and is well worth attending. Don Davis will be on hand to answer questions about monarchs and to show how the butterflies are tagged with a tiny adhesive sticker bearing a number and return address. You will even have the chance to release a tagged butterfly! Bird banders will also be there both days from 8 a.m. to noon to demonstrate the catching and banding of migrating birds.

**2.** - Fall songbird migration is at its peak. Watch for warblers and vireos in trees and shrubs along forest edges and even in well-treed city backyards. Strangely enough, the key to their presence is often the sound of chickadees. The latter often joins up with migrants during the day. A minute or two of pishing will quickly bring the chickadees out into the open with the warblers and vireos not far behind. Remember, however, that many of the warblers are in fall or immature plumage, so identification for some species can be tricky.

**3.** - Huge flocks of mostly red-winged blackbirds are a common sight in cornfields where, unfortunately, they can do considerable damage to crops.

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



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Giant swallow-tail butterflies (top) and their larvae, which resemble bird droppings, are more abundant than usual in the Kawarthas this year. Monarch butterflies, like this tagged specimen, are beginning to congregate and the distinct red and blue of the Virginia creeper is another September sign.

Ants bear wings only during the mating season.

**5.** - The most typical bird sound of September is the boisterous call of the blue jay. The majority of blue jays head to the central and southern U.S. in the winter, especially in years like this one when acorns and beech nuts are scarce. Most of the migrants are young-of-the-year birds that have not had time to establish territories and stash away provisions to help get them through the winter. Watch and listen for loose flocks of jays, especially in the morning hours.

## SEA OF YELLOW

**6.** - Canada goldenrod transforms fields and roadsides into a sea of yellow.

**7.** - All summer long, giant swallowtails - usually restricted to extreme southern Ontario - have been a common sight in many parts of the Kawarthas. Their caterpillars, whose colour and patterning actually resemble a large bird dropping, can be found on prickly-ash shrubs, a thicket-forming species with paired prickles on the twigs. It waits to be seen if their pupae will be able to successfully over-winter. If so, the giant swallowtail may be here to stay - very possibly through the courtesy of climate change.

**8.** - Dew-speckled spider webs make for beautiful photographs. Look for them in the first hour after sunrise on

shrubs and grasses, especially near wetlands.

**9.** - Although the song of the cicada fades away early in the month, ground crickets, field crickets, tree crickets, and bush-katydid continue to call fervently.

**10.** - The spiralling flight of pairs of white or sulphur butterflies is a commonly seen behaviour. A male and female butterfly will circle around each other, all the while ascending high into the sky. Then, without warning, the male will give up the chase and drop to the ground, almost like a dead weight. It is believed that the female initiates these aerial climbs to rid herself of unwanted suitors.

**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. Poison ivy offers up lovely oranges, while dogwoods and blackberry bushes provide beautiful burgundies.

**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.



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**14.** - Mushroom diversity and abundance is usually good, as long as there is sufficient rain. You may even smell the fetid odour of a stinkhorn mushroom which can "scent" an entire backyard.

**15.** - The average daily maximum for Peterborough in September is 19.6 C while the average daily minimum is 8.1 C. This makes for an overall daily average of 13.9 C. The only month this year in which the daily average temperature was not well above normal was April. So far 2012 is on pace to be the hottest year on record.

**16.** - A number of freshwater mussel species spawn in early fall. Mussels have beautifully shaped and detailed shells as well as a fascinating reproductive cycle. This includes using fish as a host during the mussel's larval stage. Unfortunately, mussels are among North America's most endangered organisms.

## WILL FROST ARRIVE?

**17.** - In mid-September, the first sub-freezing temperatures were traditionally recorded along with the first frost. With climate change, however, all bets are off as to when the first frost will occur.

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

Watch also for yellow bear and American dagger moth caterpillars, which are similar in size and also have a hairy appearance. The latter is a white caterpillar with five black hair "daggers" emerging from its back.

**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.** Leopard frogs - which seem to be particularly common this year - are starting to move from their late-summer feeding habitat of meadows and roadsides to their hibernation sites in streams, ponds and rivers. Amphibians prefer to travel during warm, wet weather, especially at night.

## AUTUMN'S OFFICIAL START

**22.** - The fall equinox takes place this morning at 10:49 a.m. marking the beginning of autumn. Today, both the moon and sun rise due east and set due west.

**23.** - 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 panicked and heart-leaved asters.

**24.** - Male white-tailed deer expend considerable time this month rubbing their antlers against branches in order to peel off the velvet covering. The main function of the rubbing behaviour, however, is to deposit scent. The scent, which originates from glands in the forehead, serves to advertise both the presence and rank of the buck.

**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.

**26.** - Sun-warmed sweetfern leaves and fallen pine needles scent the air of Shield country, especially on granite outcroppings. The smell of the first fire in the woodstove on a cool, cottage country morning also announces the change of season.

**27.** - 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.

**28.** - By late September or the first week of October the maples of the Canadian Shield and Algonquin Park are usually close to their colour peak.

**29.** - 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.

**30.** - Large, high-altitude flocks of northern Canada geese that nested along James Bay fly over as they make their way to wintering grounds in the Tennessee Valley.

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