

Autumn blaze fades to yellow

Enjoy fall colours now because October brings a cooler, paler profile

“October’s poplars are flaming torches lighting the way to winter.”
Nova Bair

With its intense colours, invigorating cooler days and the tangy smell of fallen leaves, October is high on most people’s list of favourite months. 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 mostly greys, browns and pale yellows, punctuated here and there by the greens of conifers and the smoky gold of tamarack.



Drew Monkman

Our Changing Seasons

The events listed below constitute an almanac of some of the key happenings in the natural world in October. Some events occur over the entire month while others are more restricted in time. The dates, therefore, are only an approximation. As we have seen with the above-average temperatures that appear to have become the norm, the weather has a huge influence on when certain events in nature take place. Over the past 23 months in Peterborough, every month except two – December 2010 and January 2011 – has been warmer than the 1971 to 2000 average. This warming trend may explain why a number of butterfly species that usually never appear north of the Great Lakes have turned up in the Kawarthas this year.

- 1 On an average year, fall colours in the Kawarthas reach their height at about Thanksgiving. As of Sept. 24, the Ontario Parks fall colours report estimated that colour change for Algonquin Park was close to 80%, while the Apsley and Bancroft area was at about 50%. For a great colour drive, go east from Apsley along County Rd. 504 to Lasswade and on to County Rd. 620. Turn west to Glen Alda and back to Hwy. 28.
- 2 Sparrow migration takes centre stage this month, making early October one of the busiest times of the year for backyard feeders. Spread black oil sunflower seed or niger seed on the ground and you should be able to attract white-throated and white-crowned sparrows along with dark-eyed juncos. With luck, the beautiful, thrush-like fox sparrow may even grace you with its presence. Right now, a lot of people are also getting large numbers of purple finches at their feeder.
- 3 Coyotes are quite vocal throughout the fall and can often be heard calling at night, often right on the edge of Peterborough.
- 4 As the goldenrods quickly fade away, asters dominate (and conclude!) the wildflower show this month. The generally white flowers of heath and calico asters, along with the purple or mauve blossoms of New England and purple-stemmed asters, seem to be everywhere. Go to ontariowildflowers.com for excellent tips on identifying asters.
- 5 Flocks of local giant Canada geese are also a common sight as they fly to and from feeding areas such as corn and soybean fields.
- 6 That dazzling heavenly body close



DREW MONKMAN Special to The Examiner



TERRY CARPENTER Special to The Examiner

to the moon tonight is the planet Jupiter. In the western sky, the bright star Arcturus sparkles on October evenings.

- 7 Golden-crowned and ruby-crowned kinglets, along with yellow-rumped warblers, brown creepers, white-throated sparrows, and dark-eyed juncos are migrating in large numbers. Listen for their gentle calls as they search for food in shrubby areas along roads and trails. Don’t forget to pish!
- 8 October is a great time to find salamanders. Red-backed salamanders, which are almost worm-like in appearance, are usually the most common. However, you may also find both the spotted and blue-spotted salamanders. Look carefully under flat rocks, old boards, and logs in damp wooded areas and around cottages.
- 9 If you’re an early riser and would like a preview of the winter constellations, you can now see Orion looming above the southern horizon.
- 10 The signature constellation of fall is Pegasus and its asterism, the Great Square. Adjacent to the square is 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! For detailed steps to finding this galaxy, go to Google and enter: wikihow

Andromeda.

- 11 On warm days in mid-fall, watch for strands of spider silk floating through the air or caught up in branches. A baby spider is attached to each strand. This special period of the year is sometimes called “gossamer days.”
- 12 Watch for huge flocks of mostly grackles and red-winged blackbirds in corn fields and local wetlands. Sometimes, the much rarer rusty blackbird is among them.
- 13 Buck white-tailed deer use their antlers to make scrapes in the leaf litter on the forest floor in preparation for the upcoming rut. A buck 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 Birds keep an eye open in the fall for wading birds from the southern United States that sometimes drift northward. The classic example of a post-breeding wanderer is the cattle egret. Great egrets, too, often disperse inland from Georgian Bay and Lake Ontario breeding colonies and can turn up in the Kawarthas – often along Johnston Dr. in south Peterborough!
- 15 Northern saw-whet owls migrate southward through central Ontario from late September until at least mid-

November. In a research study led by Erica Nol of Trent University, the owls are caught at night using fine netting and a tape recorder playing saw-whet owl calls. Any birds caught are untangled, weighed, measured and banded. A key finding so far is that these owls are very nomadic. Saw-whets banded by Trent near Bobcaygeon have been recaptured as far away as Virginia, Maryland, Wisconsin and Missouri.

- 16 Mid-through-late October is very much a time of yellows. Most of the colour is being supplied courtesy of trembling aspen, bigtooth aspen, balsam poplar, silver maple, white birch, and, at month’s end, tamarack.
- 17 Spring peepers are often heard calling during the day from the forest habits they call home outside of the breeding season. They are most vocal on warm, damp days.
- 18 Sulphur and mustard white butterflies are active throughout October. Keep an eye open, too, in your garden for very small brown and orange butterflies called skippers. There appears to be a northward dispersal of southern species such as the Sachem skipper this year - a possible result of climate change.
- 19 The first ground frosts usually mean that the mushroom-hunting

season is nearing its end. However, a couple of genera are stimulated by the cold. They include some of the waxcaps (Hygrophoreus) and oyster mushrooms (Pleurotus).

- 20 Because the red oak acorn crop is quite good in central Ontario this year, large numbers of blue jays will probably decide to overwinter in the Kawarthas and should also be a common sight at feeders.
- 21 The Orionids meteor shower usually peaks on the 21st, but it is highly irregular. A good show could be experienced on any morning from Oct. 20 to 24.
- 22 You can get a real sense right now of just how many of our city trees and shrubs are non-native and, therefore, still stubbornly green. These species include Norway maple, lilac, weeping willow, and European buckthorn.
- 23 Mole activity on lawns is often evident. As they excavate tunnels just under the ground surface, moles push up low ridges of soil which often cover large sections of lawns. Volcano-shaped mounds are common, too.
- 24 Migrating diving ducks stop over on our larger lakes such as Pigeon and Rice. Goldeneye, scaup and mergansers are most common.
- 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. This brings oxygen to the depths and nutrients to the shallows.
- 26 To make a nice fall and winter bouquet, pick some stems of pearly everlasting, a whitish perennial of the Canadian shield, and place them in an arrangement with sensitive fern spore stalks and the fruit-bearing twigs of winterberry holly or bitter-sweet.
- 27 The first northern finches usually show up about now. It is expected that common redpolls will turn up in good numbers this fall and winter. This is because the seed crop on birches is poor in northern Canada – birch seed is the redpoll’s winter food of choice – forcing the birds southward in search of food. We can also expect moderate numbers of pine siskins.
- 28 As a result of frost, most insect activity is usually pretty much finished by late October. Listen for the near-complete absence of insect sound.
- 29 This evening is the Hunter’s Moon, namely the first full moon after the Harvest Moon. In the fall, the full (or near-full) moon rises close to the same time for several nights in a row meaning there is no long period of darkness between sunset and moonrise. This allowed Native American hunters to hunt by autumn moonlight.
- 30 The smoky, golden-yellow of tamaracks is the final act in the annual fall pageant of tree colour. Watch for them along the edges of wetlands.
- 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. In fact, their scientific name, Lanius excubitor, means “butcher watchman.” Such macabre behaviour seems strangely appropriate at Halloween!

Drew Monkman is a retired Peterborough teacher and author of Nature's Year: Changing Seasons in Central and Eastern Ontario. He can be reached at dmonkman1@cogeco.ca. Visit his website and see past columns at www.drew-monkman.com

The yellow leaves of late-October trembling aspens and tamaracks (above) is a signature of the month, which opens with brighter colours as sugar maples (bottom left) hit their peak. The red-backed salamanders (below) is one of the most common salamanders in the Peterborough area. Mid-October is a good time to look for them and their relatives under flat rocks, old boards and in damp, wooded areas.

