

October 26, 2004

Nature's Halloween symbols

With cool, often wet weather and increasingly shorter days, it's not hard to imagine why the Celts chose this time of year to celebrate the various traditions that have become our Hallowe'en. It is interesting to look at the historical roots of the celebration and at what is *really* happening with some of its symbols - owls, bats and leafless trees - at this time of year.

The origin of Hallowe'en can be found in the natural cycles of the year as expressed by the Celtic festival of Samhain. November 1st was the Celtic New Year and marked the beginning of the season of cold and darkness. It naturally became associated with death. People believed that Samhain, the Celtic lord of death, allowed the souls of the dead to return to Earth on the evening of October 31. To ward off these ghosts, Druid priests built huge bonfires and made offerings. People sometimes wore costumes of animal skins at gatherings around bonfires, hence the modern tradition of dressing up. The Romans continued with similar traditions at this time of year, and later, the Christian church chose November 1st as All Saints Day. The term Hallowe'en actually means "eve of all the holy ones' day."

Images of owls are a traditional part of Hallowe'en decorations, so let's look at what our local species are up to. Although most of our owls are year-round residents, saw-whets, a bird not much larger than a starling, are migrating south through the Kawarthas in large numbers in October. Banding of the birds is carried out each year by Trent University at its Oliver Ecological Centre on Pigeon Lake. Although some saw-whets spend the winter along the Great Lakes in locations such as Amherst Island near Kingston, most of the Ontario population winters in the southeastern United States. The birds are caught at night by playing a recording of their whistle-like call. Curious by nature, the owl will approach the source of the sound and get caught up in a strategically-located mist net. Great horned owls are also becoming increasingly active. By November they are busy staking out breeding territories and start once again to call. Some years, northern snowy owls will also arrive in the Kawarthas within the next couple of weeks.

Unfortunately, the chances of seeing a bone fide Hallowe'en bat when you are out trick-or-treating are not the greatest. Our two most common species, the little brown and big brown bats, both take up winter residence by early October. Although they spend the winter in Canada, they must often fly considerable distances to reach hibernation sites. The closest sites to Peterborough are an abandoned mine near Renfrew and a limestone cave along the Moira River near Belleville. It is also possible that some bats overwinter at the Warsaw Caves, particularly in the smaller, less accessible caves. From late September to May, people should stay out of any caves or mines where bats are hibernating as disturbance costs the animals precious energy and is usually fatal. Many species are already extremely rare. Even if you don't particularly like bats, it's important to remember that they are nature's own bug zapper, only better. A single bat can easily rid the air of thousands of mosquitoes in a single night and no electricity is required.

If you've ever had bats in your house, big brown bats were the likely visitors. They are the hardier of the two species and sometimes try to overwinter in attics and other dry, building environments. They tend to become dehydrated, however, and often emerge from hibernation to try to find water. They usually die soon afterward.

With the exception of oaks, most of our native broad-leaved trees are now leafless, an appropriate condition for Hallowe'en spookiness. Those species still bearing leaves are "exotics"

such as Norway maple and European buckthorn which continue to follow their ancestral European or Asian timetable. My favourite leaf-shedding tree, however, is actually a conifer. The tamarack, or larch as it sometimes known, turns a Hallowe'en-appropriate, golden-yellow by late October and lights up its wetland habitat like so many candles. Brushing up against its branches causes a cascade of feather-soft needles to come sifting down. By mid-November tamaracks are completely leafless.

This is a wonderful time of year to walk in the woods. The spicy smell of the leaves seems to instantly transport us back to the autumns of our childhoods. At no other time of the year is our sense of smell so fully engaged as when walking through a deep carpet of fallen leaves on a damp October day. Our eyes, too, are startled by the changes. Looking around, it's as if a curtain has been opened, allowing us to see distant objects that were hidden from view since last spring.

Far from being the ominous time of year portrayed in Celtic tradition, Hallowe'en is an opportunity to look forward to the arrival of the birds of winter, be they bald eagles soaring over a half-frozen December lake or flocks of redpolls descending on our feeders. For many, this is also a time of anticipation for the camaraderie of the annual deer hunt. And, for nearly all of us, our thoughts begin to turn to the excitement of the holiday season just around the corner.

What to watch for this week:

Robins are migrating through right now. The large, restless flocks feed heavily on buckthorn and mountain-ash berries in the fall. Also, watch for flocks of red-winged and rusty blackbirds in corn fields and wetlands. Southward-bound diving ducks such as scaup and mergansers are congregating on the larger Kawartha Lakes.

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