

October 3, 2006

## **A Time of Falling Leaves**

In early October, the sun still shines with warm benevolence. Yet, it is not the light of summer. Often hazy and surreal, October sunshine has a quality all its own. As crickets sing softly from meadows of aster, winter seems far away. But, as experience has taught us, the beauty of early October is both temporary and fragile. So, we try to hang on to these magnificent days before wind and rain scatter leaves and colder weather descends upon us. Perhaps it is the ephemeral nature of October's loveliness that makes it so special.

October mornings greet us with the first heavy frosts of the season. As the sun warms the cold night air, leaves shower down from trees, and vistas that were hidden all summer long once again become visible. This is the month of the rake; but there is a payoff for our labour. The familiar, spicy smell of the fallen leaves transports us back to childhood, evoking an instant flood of memories of autumns past.

As the month draws to a close, the only leaf colour that remains is the yellow of poplars and tamaracks and the browns, oranges and burgundy of oaks. Corn fields and cattail marshes become a sea of drab yellow, and fallen leaves quickly turn an ubiquitous brown. With cold, damp weather and markedly 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.

The events listed below are typical of an average October in the Kawarthas. As with every month, the dates are an approximation. Some events can occur over the entire month while others, the passage of northern Canada geese for example, take place over a more restricted window of time. You may wish to use the box in front of each date to check off those occurrences that you witness yourself.

1 Northern Canada geese continue to stream southward in large, high-altitude flocks.

2 Large, grey, Western conifer seed bugs (sometimes called leaf-footed or squash bugs) seek overwintering sites in homes this month. They can measure up to 2 cm in length and look rather imposing. This insect cannot breed indoors, however.

3 Sulphur and cabbage butterflies are active throughout October. The occasional monarch, too, can usually be seen until late in the month.

4 White, mauve and purple asters are the dominant wildflowers this month, bringing the roadside floral parade to a close. Watch for heath, panicled and calico asters in particular.

5 This is sparrow month at feeders. Watch for white-throated and white-crowned sparrows, along with dark-eyed juncoes. If you are lucky, a thrush-like fox sparrow may even put in an appearance. Be sure to scatter seed on the ground.

6 The full moon of October is known as the Hunter's Moon. In early fall, the moon rises only about 30 minutes later each evening and stays low in the sky. Fields and forests are bathed in moonlight allowing hunters of days past to pursue game late into the evening.

7 Golden-crowned and ruby-crowned kinglets, along with yellow-rumped warblers, pass through in large numbers. They can be heard calling as they search for food.

8 Frogs and toads are often found sitting motionless on warm road pavement on wet, mild fall nights.

9 Fall colours are at their height. Quite often, the peak coincides with the Thanksgiving weekend. Sugar and red maples steal the show.

10 The Orion constellation towers over the southern sky as we head off to work in the early

morning darkness. Like falling leaves, it is a sign that winter is fast approaching.

\_\_ 11 On warm, sunny October days, the light often has a hazy, almost dream-like quality. This is due to large amounts of water vapour in the air in fall and the fact that the fall sun is lower in the sky. The two factors combine to create a feeling of reverie.

\_\_ 12 Through late summer and fall, bird species that are usually found in more southern regions often drift northward into the Kawarthas. The most common of these is the great egret.

\_\_ 13 Watch for white-tailed deer feeding along the edges of fields and woodlots at dawn and dusk.

\_\_ 14 Trees are quickly shedding their leaves now, each species following its own timetable. Ash are often the first species to become leafless.

\_\_ 15 Starling-sized saw-whet owls migrate southward through the Kawarthas.

\_\_ 16 Bright yellow aspens and brown, red and burgundy oaks take over the fall foliage spectacle.

\_\_ 17 Starnose moles are very active in the fall. They tunnel just below the surface of the ground in search of earthworms. In the process, large quantities of soil are pushed up from below into mounds.

\_\_ 18 Muskellunge continue to feed heavily. This can make for great fishing.

\_\_ 19 The sporadic calling of spring peepers can still be heard on warm days.

\_\_ 20 Migrating diving ducks congregate on the larger Kawartha Lakes such as Pigeon Lake. Watch for large rafts of goldeneye and scaup along with mergansers.

\_\_ 21 Mating clouds of midges are still common, even on days when the temperature is close to freezing.

\_\_ 22 Because they are still mostly green and fully-leaved, the extent of non-native trees and shrubs becomes evident. Norway maple, lilac and European buckthorn stand out in particular.

\_\_ 23 Deer mice seek out winter accommodation. Human habitations are often chosen.

\_\_ 24 Eastern garter snakes are still active and can be seen basking in the mid-fall sun. They are the last of the snakes to retreat to winter quarters.

\_\_ 25 The “fall turn-over” begins to re-oxygenate lakes this month and will continue until freeze-up. It occurs when the surface water cools and mixes with the uniformly-cold deeper waters below. At times, the mixing even brings dead weeds to the surface.

\_\_ 26 Chipmunks retreat to their secure, well-provisioned dens. Unlike groundhogs, chipmunks are unable to store large amounts of body fat and must therefore eat throughout the winter.

\_\_ 27 The first winter usually show up about now. Depending on the year, these may include pine siskins, common redpolls and pine grosbeaks.

\_\_ 28 Brightly-coloured brook trout spawn at gravel-bottomed sites in stream headwaters and along lakeshores. They choose areas where spring water wells up through the gravel.

\_\_ 29 Daylight Savings Time ends on the last Sunday of October. Set your clocks back an hour. Total darkness is upon us now by 5:30 p.m.

\_\_ 30 The smoky, golden-yellow of tamaracks lights up wetland borders like so many candles. They represent the final act in the annual fall colour extravaganza.

\_\_ 31 Right on cue for Hallowe'en, late October is often when people come across bats in older schools, churches and homes. These are usually big brown bats looking for wintering sites or animals that have been disturbed during their dormancy.

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