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LIVING

November's hush

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OUR CHANGING SEASONS
Drew Monkman

As we enter November, a pre-winter stillness is settling upon the natural world. The calls of migrating sparrows and kinglets cease, most robins bid us farewell and the last crickets surrender to the cold. Damp, often cloudy weather, leafless trees and faded grasses and flowers create a world of greys and browns, punctuated only by the dark green of conifers. Yet some years late fall's typical bleakness is pushed aside by a lingering Indian Summer that gently eases us into winter.

Like the first red-winged blackbirds in March, the arrival of the birds of winter marks the approaching change of season. In addition to shrikes and tree sparrows, bald eagles will return in the coming weeks to spend the winter in the Kawarthas. They are joined most years by several species of northern finches. At the same time, however, loons are departing for the Atlantic seaboard and taking with them the last vestiges of summer. For lake-side residents, it is a melancholy event.

A walk on a November day seems uneventful, with seemingly little of interest to catch our attention. Still, the relative scarcity of plants and animals allows us to focus on the commonplace — the leafless trees reduced to their elemental form, the intricacy and diversity of the mosses and evergreen ferns, and the beauty of a milkweed pod spilling its last seeds. But, other than the occasional call of a chickadee or woodpecker and the steady rustling of squirrels and mice foraging for seeds, the woods are nearly devoid of animal sounds. With colder weather, nature's kaleidoscope of smells is also reduced to a minimum. Apart from the scent of decaying leaves or the smoke of a wood stove, there is little to stir our sense of smell. Yet the cold of late fall brings renewed appreciation for the warmth and comfort of our homes and growing anticipation, among those of us who enjoy winter at least, for the new season just around the corner.

The events listed below are typical of an average November in the Kawarthas. The dates, however, are only an approximation. Some events occur over the entire month while others are more restricted in time. Many are dependent on the vagaries of the weather. The box in front of each date may be used to check off those events that you witness yourself.

□ 1. Most of our loons and robins head south. However, a small number of robins regularly overwinter in Peterborough, especially in years like this, when wild fruit is plentiful.

□ 2. A few hardy field crickets may still be heard on warm days.

□ 3. Oaks, tamaracks and silver maples are about the only mature deciduous trees that are native to the Kawarthas that may still retain their foliage in early November. A particularly attractive stand of red oak can be seen at the south entrance to the village of Bridgenorth.

□ 4. Non-native trees such as weeping willows and Chinese elms are often still green and stand out like sore thumbs against the late fall landscape. Unfortunately, they take away from our "sense of place."

□ 5. Bird feeder activity tends to slow down as migrant sparrows have now left. With any luck, however, northern finches such as pine siskins and common redpolls will fill some of the void.

□ 6. With the arrival of the breeding season, white-tail bucks are now in rut. Today also marks the beginning of the annual deer harvest by rifle and shotgun. Car accidents involving deer are very common this month. Be careful, especially at night.

□ 7. The last dragonflies of the year may still be active. The most common species to



Birch, spruce and pine stand out prominently in this typical November landscape.

Terry Carpenter, special to The Examiner

watch for is the yellow-legged meadowhawk. This is a small red or yellow dragonfly.

□ 8. The seeds and fruits of a wide variety of trees, shrubs and vines attract birds and provide some rare November colour. The red berries of winterberry holly, a shrub of wetland borders, are especially attractive.

□ 9. It is not uncommon to see mourning cloak and Compton tortoiseshell butterflies on warm November days. Both of these species overwinter as adults.

□ 10. Watch for migrating ducks such as goldeneyes and buffleheads along the Otonabee River near Lakefield and on Lake Katchewanooka near the bridge at Young's Point. Also, a good selection of diving ducks can almost always be found in the first pond of the Lakefield sewage lagoons, located on the south side of Block Road (County Road 33), just south of the village.

□ 11. Frogs opt for one of two options to get through winter. Some, like the green frog, settle into the mud at the bottom of ponds and wetlands. Others, like the grey treefrog and the spring peeper, spend the winter as frozen "frogsicles" in the leaf litter of the forest floor. Glycerol, acting as an antifreeze, inhibits freezing within the frogs' cells.

□ 12. Toads, as well as salamanders and snakes, retreat to below the frost line as their overwintering strategy.

□ 13. Striped skunks, raccoons and black bears retreat to their winter quarters but will come out on warm days. They are not true hibernators.

□ 14. Mosses, club-mosses, lichens and several species of evergreen ferns stand out against the brown leaf litter of the forest floor and deserve close observation.

□ 15. Surprisingly enough, November's average number of days with rain is no more than during the summer months.

□ 16. Monarch butterflies are arriving now in large numbers on their wintering grounds in the Sierra Madre mountains west of Mexico City. This year monarchs are expected to cover around 6.5 hectares of forest which is well below the average of nine hectares. This is mostly because of dry conditions over much of the butterfly's mid-western range this summer.

□ 17. In our woodlands, the only trees still clinging to some of their foliage are young American beech, sugar maple and ironwood. Many will retain some leaves all winter.

□ 18. Hard corn is still being harvested this month and green fields of young wheat stand out noticeably. The smell of manure is often in the air as farmers spread it to fertilize their fields in the fall.

□ 19. Most red-tailed hawks leave the Kawarthas for more southern climes. On a good day, hundreds can be seen migrating along the north shore of Lake Ontario. Some will actually spend the winter along the lakeshore and are a common sight along the 401.

□ 20. The Pleiades (Seven Sisters) star cluster adorns the eastern sky in the evening.

□ 21. Muskrats build cone-shaped lodges and feeding platforms of cattails, rushes and mud. The lodges are only about a metre in height. These animals are easy to observe this month.

□ 22. Ball-like swellings on the stems of goldenrod plants become quite visible. These are galls that contain the larva of the gold-

enrod fly.

□ 23. Walleye begin to move upstream along large rivers such as the Otonabee. They remain in the rivers over the course of the winter in anticipation of the early spring spawn.

□ 24. Our local bald eagle population expands with the arrival of birds from northern Ontario. These magnificent raptors will spend the winter in the Kawarthas.

□ 25. A taste of winter comes in November. The first significant snowfall usually occurs and permanent snow cover is sometimes with us by month's end.

□ 26. Male great horned owls stake out breeding territories and become quite vocal. A useful mnemonic to remember their call is "who's awake...me, too."

□ 27. Frost is recorded an average of 20 days this month.

□ 28. The sound of coyotes calling is typical of November nights.

□ 29. As long as there is open water, diving ducks and small numbers of loons will continue to linger on local bodies of water including Little Lake in Peterborough.

□ 30. The Orion constellation's arrival in the southeast adds to the enjoyment of an evening's walk in late November.

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