

EDITOR: **ROB McCORMICK**
745-4641 ext. 244 / fax 743-4581
life@peterboroughexaminer.com

LIVING

Premonitions of fall

This was one of those perfect New England days in late summer where the spirit of autumn takes a first stealing flight, like a spy, through the ripening country-side, and, with feigned sympathy for those who droop with August heat, puts her cool cloak of bracing air about leaf and flower and human shoulders. — Sarah Orne Jewett, The Courting of Sister Wisby, 1887



OUR CHANGING SEASONS

Drew Monkman

For those of us who emerge from our summer torpor with the cooler weather of September and can't wait for the riot of tree colour just around the corner, August is a time of much anticipated premonitions of fall. Even so, the month can be deceptive. Fresh corn and tomatoes, lush vegetation, and hot and humid weather all seem to reassure us that summer still reigns supreme. Nevertheless, signs of the changing season are everywhere: Bird song has almost ceased, only to be replaced by a relentless wall of insect music; avian migration is already well under way; the first leaves are beginning to change colour; and, by month's end, misty dawns signal increasingly cooler nights. The winter constellation Orion is even visible in the pre-dawn sky.

As with each month, the following almanac provides an overview of the events in our flora, fauna, weather and sky that are typical of August. Many of the dates, of course, are only an approximation, since many events depend on what the weather brings us.

□ **1** Swallows continue to flock up on telephone wires. Most will have departed by month's end.

□ **2** Other than the sporadic singing of a handful of species such as red-eyed vireos, northern cardinals, mourning doves, peewees and song sparrows, most bird song — as opposed to calls — has ceased. Quite common, however, are the high-pitched “lispings” calls of cedar waxwings and the shrill, harsh “jaaay” screams of blue jays.

□ **3** In early August, Queen Anne's lace, along known as wild carrot, continues to dominate August roadsides. You will notice that in the middle of some flower heads there is a deep red purple structure. According to English folklore, it is a drop of blood that fell from Queen Anne's finger when she pricked it making lace. Its true function, however, is a mystery.

□ **4** Leopard frogs wander en masse from their wetland habitat to invade nearby fields in search of insects, hence their common names of meadow or grass frog

□ **5** Three planets are easily visible this month. Venus shines brightly very low in the west just after dark but sets about an hour after sunset. Jupiter is high in the south just after sunset. Shining like a red star, Mars rises out of the east about an hour after midnight.

□ **6** Listen for the electric, buzz-saw song of the dog-day cicada, named because it is particularly active in the hot, humid “dog days”

Fresh corn and tomatoes, lush vegetation and hot and humid weather all seem to reassure us that summer still reigns supreme, but signs of the changing season are everywhere



A female meadowhawk dragonfly, a common August insect.

Drew Monkman, special to The Examiner

of August. The buzz is produced by drumskin-like membranes inside the abdomen. The membranes are “wobbled” by muscular action and produce their high-pitched sound in the same way sound is produced by wobbling a saw blade.

□ **7** At this time of year, the “dog star,” Sirius, rises in the southeast just before the sun. Because it is the brightest star in the night sky, the ancient Romans believed that its heat contributed to the heat of the sun, thereby creating a stretch of hot and sultry weather. They therefore named this period of time “dog days” after the dog star.

□ **8** Petroglyphs Provincial Park is a great spot for botanizing in August. Woodland sunflower, harebell and showy tick-trefoil are all in bloom. Numerous species of ferns abound, as well.

□ **9** Watch for underwing moths, named for the bright colours of the underwings. However, when the underwings are hidden, all that is visible is the mottled brown or grey of the forewings.

□ **10** Groups of loons, averaging from three to 20 birds, are sometimes seen on our lakes in summer. The function of these convocations is unclear. It is thought, however, that they may be young, non-breeding individuals or perhaps birds that lost their nests early in the season and didn't nest.

□ **11** Bobolinks have mostly gathered into flocks and taken refuge in marshes. Silent and often hidden, they are in the process of molting. By month's end, most will have departed for central South America, clothed in nearly 1,000 new feathers.

□ **12** The Perseid meteor shower peaks tonight and tomorrow morning. Because the moon is in the new moon phase, there will be no moonlight tonight, which means dark skies and, hopefully, plenty of meteors. The show begins at about 10 p.m. but will be at its best between midnight and dawn Monday morning when 60 or more meteors an hour are possible.

□ **13** Spotted jewelweed, purple loosestrife, spotted Joe-Pye weed, small-flowered agalinis, and the uncommon but beautiful cardinal flower add oranges, purples, pinks and reds to wetland edges.

□ **14** If you're out walking along our rail-trails or gravel roads, watch for Carolina locusts. With their yellow-bordered wings and the crackling sound they make as they fly, they are hard to miss. They are sometimes referred to as “road dusters” because of the little puff of dust they create when they land.

□ **15** Many of our trees and shrubs bear ripe fruit in August. Among the most conspicuous

fruits are those of tartarian honeysuckle, European buckthorn, choke cherry, Virginia creeper, highbush cranberry, common elderberry and staghorn sumac.

□ **16** Colour change is already noticeable in some trees, shrubs and vines. Red maples growing near lake and wetland edges are the first trees to show splashes of fall colour. The leaves of some sumacs and Virginia creepers also begin to acquire their fall colours.

□ **17** Shorebird migration is at its peak. Beach Four at Presqu'île Provincial Park at Brighton offers the best viewing opportunities.

□ **18** Ragweed is in bloom, and its pollen has hay fever sufferers cursing with every sneeze. The small, green flowers of ragweed plants rely on the wind to spread their irritating, spike covered pollen grains. Remember, goldenrod is not the culprit!

□ **19** Monarch butterfly numbers are usually at their highest about now. Even around Peterborough, hundreds can sometimes be seen clustering together on trees to form overnight roosts.

□ **20** Songbird migration is in full swing, with numerous warblers, vireos and flycatchers moving through. Unlike the spring, fall migration is a much more drawn-out process. For example, the red-eyed vireo is a common

migrant from mid-August until early October.

□ **21** Small dragonflies known as meadowhawks abound. Mature males are red, while females and immature males are yellowish.

□ **22** Large flocks of migrating nighthawks used to be a common August sight in late afternoons or early evenings. They are a rare treat these days.

□ **23** Black bears are feeding heavily on berries and nuts. Favourite foods include blueberries, black cherries, apples, acorns, hazelnuts and beechnuts.

□ **24** The soft, rhythmic “treet...treet...treet” of snowy tree crickets is a common sound. Sounding almost like a gentle-voiced spring peeper, this is the insect you often hear calling in campfire scenes in westerns. By counting the number of chirps in seven seconds and adding five, you can make an accurate estimation of the temperature in degrees Celsius.

□ **25** Mid to late August is a good time to look on milkweed plants for the yellow and black larvae of the monarch butterfly. They are easy to rear in captivity and provide adults and children alike with a first-hand lesson in insect metamorphosis. See <http://www.monarchwatch.org/> for detailed instructions.

□ **26** Eastern yellowjacket wasps are usually very conspicuous by now. They are easily identified by the upper black marking nearest the thorax. It is triangular with a narrow black stem or neck which extends to the upper edge of the abdomen.

□ **27** Goldenrods reach peak bloom at month's end and take over as the main roadside and field flowers. These plants are veritable insect magnets, drawing in an amazing variety of species with their offerings of pollen and nectar. They provide superb opportunities for close-up insect observation and photography.

□ **28** Listen for the faint contact calls of migrating birds as they pass overhead at night. Because each different type of bird has a unique call note, it is possible to identify both the different species and numbers of individuals flying over. Computers, hooked up to rooftop microphones, are now being used to analyse the calls and thereby provide a snapshot of how much migration occurs on a given night.

□ **29** Heavy morning mists often complement the beauty of the August sunrise. Mist consists of tiny water droplets that form in pockets of cold air located above low terrain, especially lakes, marshes and valleys, where surface moisture is present.

□ **30** Orion, the main constellation of winter, is now visible one hour before dawn on the eastern horizon.

□ **31** There is often a very noticeable algal bloom in the Kawartha Lakes in August or September. Unicellular blue-green algae such as species of the genus *Microcystis* are common at this time of year.

Drew Monkman is a Peterborough teacher and author of Nature's Year in the Kawarthas. He can be reached at dmonkman1@cogeco.ca. Visit his website at www.drew-monkman.com.