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LIVING

November almanac

It is a joy to walk in the bare woods. The moonlight is not broken by the heavy leaves. The leaves are down, and touching the soaked earth, Giving off the odors that partridges love.

— **Robert Bly, Solitude**
Late at Night in the Woods



OUR CHANGING SEASONS

Drew Monkman

The events listed below represent an almanac of key happenings in the natural world during a typical November in the Kawarthas. Some events can occur over the entire month while others are more restricted in time. Many are dependent on the vagaries of the weather.

□ 1. Some early November bird departures include great blue herons, killdeer, greater yellowlegs, common snipe, fox sparrows and most of our robins, loons and red-tailed hawks.

□ 2. 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 about five to six hectares of forest, a little lower than last year. Initially, it was thought that the numbers would be higher but, partly because of drought in the southern U.S., the migration has been extremely slow and not as many monarchs are expected to make it all the way to their wintering grounds.

□ 3. Ring-billed gulls are one of the most commonly seen birds in November. They spend the night, however, on large bodies of water such as Chemong and Rice lakes where they are safe from predators. With freeze-up, most will head to the Gulf states.

□ 4. We return to Standard Time today. Turn your clocks back one hour. Sunrise will be at 6:53 a.m. and sunset at 4:59 p.m. for a total of only 10 hours and five minutes of daylight. Compare this to the 15 and a half hours we enjoyed back in June!

□ 5. Today marks the beginning of the annual deer harvest by rifle and shotgun. The buck's antlers have matured and hardened now, and they are "in rut," or at the peak of their sexual readiness.

□ 6. Numbers of American tree sparrows and northern shrikes increase. Some years, an influx of winter finches such as pine grosbeaks, pine siskins, and common redpolls also occurs at this time. Since mid-October, siskins have already been showing up.

□ 7. Other than the occasional clouded sulphur butterfly, cluster fly, or meadowhawk dragonfly, few insects are active. Most have already begun diapause, the state of halted development in which insects overwinter. The stage of the life cycle in which diapause occurs depends on the species. For example, mourning cloak butterflies overwinter as adults, swallowtails as pupae (chrysalis), Isabella moths as larvae (the woolly bear caterpillar), and tent caterpillar moths as eggs.

□ 8. The black berries of the European buckthorn become

Coyotes, forest-floor plants, the deer hunt, bald eagles and tracks in the snow



Clockwise, from top: Ring-billed gulls are one of the most commonly seen birds in November; the hooded merganser is still fairly common in the Kawarthas at this time of year; and American tree sparrows arrive in large numbers this month.

increasingly visible as this invasive, non-native shrub sheds its leaves. A common city and suburban species, its fruit is quite popular with robins. Unfortunately, however, the berries are also a strong laxative which results in purple bird dropping stains on concrete and patio stones.

□ 9. If you're bringing in firewood from outside, you may find a wasp tucked away under some of the loose bark. This is a pregnant queen, her body cells full of glycerol to avoid freezing solid, ready to start a new colony when spring-time arrives.

□ 10. A trip to the Lakefield sewage lagoons, located on the south side of Block Road (County Road 33), just south of the village, is well worth the effort at this time of year. You should be able to get good looks at migrant ducks such as common goldeneye, bufflehead, ring-necked duck, lesser scaup, and hooded merganser. The birds are in the basin closest to the road.

□ 11. If the weather is mild, you may still hear the occasional spring peeper calling plaintively from woodlands. With the onset of cold temperatures, however, the peeper will burrow down into the leaf litter of the forest floor and literally become a small block of amphibian ice. Surprisingly, the

ice does not harm the animal because it forms in the body cavities outside of the cells. Glycerol, acting as an antifreeze, inhibits freezing within the frog's cells.

□ 12. Toads, as well as salamanders and snakes, retreat to below the frost line to overwinter. Bullfrogs, leopard, and green frogs, settle into the mud at the bottom of ponds and wetlands.

□ 13. Early snowfalls reveal the nocturnal world of mammal movements. Coyotes, deer, squirrels, cottontails, mice, and voles are just a few of the species that leave their tracks for us to decipher.

□ 14. This is the best time of year to focus on several groups of plants of the forest floor that usually escape our attention. The intricacy and diversity of evergreen ferns, mosses, and clubmosses which are easily visible right now, are quite astounding.

□ 15. Although most of our crows migrate south about now, an increasing number remains to spend the winter here.

□ 16. Now that the leaves have fallen from cherry trees and shrubs, black knot fungus, *Apiosporina morbosa*, stands out like charred animal droppings hanging from the twigs. The dark swellings are actually the cherry's own cells that have gone amok

because of the fungus.

□ 17. In our woodlands, the only trees still clinging to remnants of their foliage are oaks and young American beech, sugar maple and ironwood. Why these species retain some of their leaves — often for the whole winter — is not really understood.

□ 18. People sometimes come across bats in the house in late fall. These are usually a species called the big brown bat. Typically, the animal has tried to overwinter in a cool area such as the attic but has somehow been disturbed.

□ 19. Small numbers of glaucous, Iceland, and great black-backed gulls, three species which are uncommon in the Kawarthas, may begin to show up on Little Lake, on the larger Kawartha Lakes, and at the Peterborough landfill on Bensfort Road.

□ 20. The exposed crowns of white birch appear smoky purple when seen from a distance. This is the new twig growth has a purple-red bark. Only the older branches have the familiar white "birch bark."

□ 21. Snowshoe hares and weasels are acquiring their white winter coats. In the case of the hare, the ears and feet turn white first while the back is the last section of the body to change colour.

□ 22. Ball-like swellings known as galls are easy to see on the stems of goldenrod plants. If you open the gall with a knife, you will find a small white larva inside. The larva spends the winter in this cozy enclosure. In the spring it will emerge as an adult goldenrod gall fly.

□ 23. A late fall visit to a local wetland can often provide a front-row seat to the secret lives of beavers and muskrats. Beavers are busy now cutting down trees to gather branches for their winter food cache — a big pile of mostly submerged vegetation beside the lodge. Muskrats occupy themselves building mounds of mud and cattails for winter shelter.

□ 24. Bald eagles from northern Ontario begin to arrive and bolster the ranks of our handful of resident eagles. Jack Lake and Lake Katchewanooka are often good spots to see these birds.

□ 25. Covered by millions of fallen leaves, the forest floor is hard at work as a gigantic recycling centre. In this, the last stage of the ecological cycle, dead organic matter is being softened, shredded, digested, and decomposed by countless billions of organisms into simpler compounds that can be reused by the forest's plant communities.

□ 26. Aldo Leopold, in *A Sand County Almanac*, referred to November as "the month of the axe." The weather is cool enough to make outdoor work comfortable, and, by cutting, splitting, and stacking wood between now and the end of February, late winter freezing and thawing will cause cracking and allow drying air to enter. Remember, however, that "tidying up" a woodlot by removing dead trees will only make it much poorer as wildlife habitat.

□ 27. Between 1971 and 2000, November's average daily high in Peterborough was 6 C and the minimum was -2 C. Twenty nights with frost were average for the month. With climate change increasingly apparent, it will be interesting to see if we come anywhere near the average this year.

□ 28. Coyotes are often heard in late fall. The coyotes of central Ontario are closely related to the eastern wolf (*Canis lycaon*). Consequently, the two species sometimes hybridize, a male wolf mating with a female coyote. All wolf-like animals of Peterborough County contain, to varying degrees, both coyote and eastern wolf genetic material.

□ 29. Watch for pine grosbeaks. Some birders are predicting good numbers of these beautiful finches this winter.

□ 30. The Pleiades (Seven Sisters) star cluster adorns the eastern sky, while Orion looms over the southeast. They both add interest to an evening's walk in late November.

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