



LOVE YOUR COUNTRYSIDE

Please enjoy this extract from

The Wildlife Year

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inspires people across England.



Hedgerows

In September and October, the hedgerows hang heavy with wild berries. It's one of nature's delicious tricks, to disguise a plant's seeds in a fruity coating so birds and mammals devour and disperse them. Hedgerows are also a lifeline for native wildlife, often a last chance to line the belly before winter depravations set in.

During early autumn, the hedgerow is also laden with edible pleasures for us. Come September, most of the blackberries and wild raspberries will be over but the few that are left will be at their absolute sweetest. Hawthorn berries, which are also known simply as haws, will be at their peak and make delicious vinegars and ketchup. Haws are also stuffed with pectin, the ingredient that helps jam to set, so excellent for adding to jellies, preserves and fruit leather. Seek out rosehips too – they make floral, tangy syrups and cordials, as well as jellies and jams.

And don't forget the humble sloe, the fruit of the blackthorn. Rural folk would wait until the first frost had nipped the sloes or 'bletted' them, which softened the fruit and removed some of its acidity. Only then would you add the sloes to your spirit of choice, seal up the bottle and wait until winter to enjoy its inky sweetness.

House Spiders

Have you ever noticed that, come September, house spiders seem to come out of the woodwork? It used to be thought that the cooler weather brought eight-legged interlopers indoors but it now seems that these secretive creatures were probably in your home all along. September is the prime month for house spider mating. While females will stay in their cobwebs, usually well hidden from view, the males venture out and about in the hope of finding a companion. If you see a house spider scuttling along the carpet, it's probably a hopeful male suitor, scouring your abode for a partner. If he's lucky and finds a lover, she'll let him move in and between now and winter they'll co-habit in her cobweb. It's a brief honeymoon, however, as the male will die, exhausted, before winter, leaving the female to hatch their handful of young the following spring.



Crab Apples

From fieldfares to foxes, blackbirds to badgers, many creatures bolster their diet with the native crab apple. The crab is also one of the few trees that will host the pernicky mistletoe. Come spring and summer, the leaves of the crab apple tree feed moth caterpillars, while its blossom provides nectar and pollen for a multitude of pollinating insects. Plant a crab apple tree and you'll be doing both nature and apple-growers a huge favour. Not only do these ancient, native trees bring wildlife to your doorstep but crab apples also help to pollinate delicious orchard apples nearby. Most cultivated apple varieties need the pollen from a different apple tree to bear fruit. Because crab apples are in blossom for such a long time, they act as excellent 'pollination partners' for orchard apple trees, many of which have short and varied flowering times of their own.

Leaves

During autumn, the trees are set aflame. Leaves that were intense green burst into a fiery palette of yellows, oranges, reds and russet browns. Then, as the ambers of autumn die down, this foliage separates from its parent tree and tumbles to the forest floor. It's a remarkable pageant and yet few of us know why, or how, the colours of autumn change.

During spring and summer, leaves are green because they are full of chlorophyll, the pigment which allows the tree to turn sunlight into simple sugars. These sugars keep the tree alive, giving it the nourishment it needs to grow and develop. When autumn begins, the shorter days and cooler temperatures tell the tree it's time to stop producing chlorophyll. This allows the leaves' other, hidden colours to show through. Carotenoids are always present in leaves but usually masked by green chlorophyll. These are finally given a chance to shine, giving autumn leaves their yellow or orange hue. Some trees also produce anthocyanins towards the end of summer. These give certain trees, such as red maples, their dramatic russet, pink and purple leaves. The leaves of some species, such as oak, also turn brown thanks to a pigment called tannin.

Hedgehogs

Autumn is a race against time for the bristling, bumbling hedgehog. While summer was all about finding a mate, and raising a family, autumn is the season for self-imposed gluttony. With winter providing few opportunities for food, hedgehogs must use these three months to put on enough body fat to see them through until next spring. In September, finding earthworms, beetles and other insects isn't too taxing, but by early November the pickings can be thin on the ground, especially if the frost shows its face.

Creating useful piles of plant debris, in quiet corners of your garden, will give the hedgehog a fighting chance. At this time of year, a hedgehog will start building its hibernaculum and will take material from these heaps. More substantial than a loose nest, their winter homes are tightly woven with twigs, grasses, leaves, bracken and other plant material and will keep the hedgehog warm through the worst of the weather. They'll also choose a suitably sheltered spot – at the base of a hedge, in an old burrow or under a garden shed. Only with a full tummy, will they

happily curl up in their hibernaculum, close their eyes and drift off into their seasonal slumber.





Acorns & Conkers

Potential. Such an interesting word. We use it now to mean ‘capable of becoming’ but it comes from the ancient Latin *potentia*, meaning ‘formidable power’. Few words could better describe autumn’s acorns and conkers. While the acorn is the nut of the mighty oak, the glossy conker belongs to the horse chestnut tree; both seeds contain all the information and energy needed to grow into gigantic, mature trees. Horse chestnuts can live for three centuries, their crowns reaching heights of 30 metres or more. While oak trees rarely reach much higher, their capacity for longevity is extraordinary.

The girth measurement gives away an oak tree’s true age; a trunk five and a half metres in circumference suggests the tree was just an acorn around the time of the Civil War. An eight-metre girth and the acorn belongs to the age of the Black Death, the beginning of the Renaissance and Robert the Bruce. To reach this venerable age, an acorn or conker must have luck on their side. Of the thousands that tumble to the ground, only a handful will germinate and grow. It’s a miracle that any tree reaches a century. To survive a thousand years is truly against all the odds.

Geese & Swans

We often love to complain about chilly weather. But for some species of migratory birds, western Europe’s cooler months are positively balmy. Many of the geese that migrate to our shores in autumn are escaping even colder extremes back home. When the temperatures really start to plummet across the Arctic Circle and Nordic countries, geese will take to the sky. Some of their journeys are remarkable. Dark-bellied Brent geese, for example, abandon the arctic tundra of northern Russia and fly huge distances to reach the temperate comfort of England’s estuaries. Their Pale-bellied cousins make an equally impressive pilgrimage, departing from Canada and Greenland to make a four-thousand-kilometre beeline for Ireland, Scotland and France.

The diminutive Bewick’s swan, another autumn visitor, leaves its Siberian breeding ground and seeks sanctuary in East Anglia,



the Severn Estuary and Lancashire. There, it’ll Hoover up leftover grain and potatoes in farmers’ fields during the day and spend its evenings roosting safely on open water. Come spring, migrating geese and swans will once again up sticks and head back to their summer residences to breed.



Toadstools

Our ancestors were right to be wary of toadstools. Not only will certain species make you ill or hallucinate if ingested, some are truly lethal. To add to the jeopardy, noxious species can look alarmingly similar to edible ones. The Deadly Webcap, for example, looks suspiciously similar to an edible Chanterelle and often tricks the unwary.

Some toadstools helpfully advertise their harmfulness; the Fly Agaric is unmistakable with its storybook red hat with white spots. Others look innocuous but hide a deadly secret. The Death Cap, for example, is one of the world's most toxic toadstools. Just nibbling half is enough to kill an adult. Another toadstool that lives up to its name is the Destroying Angel, a pure-white specimen concealing a murderous heart. The victim often feels sick initially but then briefly rallies, only to slip into a deep and irretrievable coma. Toadstools should invite our respect. But we can also celebrate their beauty. The Fool's Conecap is a delicate delight, a tiny tan parasol that pokes out from the leaf litter. Seek out toadstools and revel in their good looks. When it comes to foraging, however, maybe leave the risk-taking to the experts.



Ladybirds



As the days shorten and the outside temperature begins its inexorable descent, the ladybird senses that winter is around the corner. Few of her kind could survive an arctic snap but the real problem is the lack of their favourite food, aphids, who overwinter as eggs. And so, wisely, the ladybird calls it a day and heads for a warm, tight crevice to wait it out until spring. Some of her fellow ladybirds will go it alone and crawl into a wall crack or behind loose bark to spend the next few months in splendid isolation. Other species of ladybird prefer safety in numbers and hibernate in clusters, huddling together in window-frame gaps or garden sheds. Few begrudge the ladybird this autumn bed-and-board, however. Thanks to her exemplary aphid-munching skills, she's beloved by farmers and gardeners alike. In fact, folklore will tell you if a ladybird graces your presence, a spot of good fortune is bound to follow.



Dark Skies

Autumn is a stargazer's dream. Throughout summer, the night rarely gets dark enough to put on a sparkling show. Come October, however, and the long but still mild evenings create the optimum conditions to scour the evening sky. Artificial light created by streetlights and cities can spoil the fun so head to one of the many official 'dark sky' places or events held near you. Reignite your inner navigator and learn how to find true north. Look for the brightest star in the sky – this is Polaris or the 'North Star'. If you're not sure you've found it, look for the unmistakable seven stars of the Plough to its left (also called the Big Dipper or Saucepan) and the five-starred 'w' shape of Cassiopeia to its right. Because Polaris seems to stay locked in the sky, while the other stars move their position, it has long been used as a fixed point for navigation and astronomy. Find the 'North Star' and you'll always find your way home.



Murmurations

From November onwards the early evening sky comes alive. About an hour or so around dusk, the heavens fill with clouds of starlings, swooping and stunt-diving in synchronised displays. These boiling, swirling flights are called ‘murmurations’. It’s a curious word, and an old one, long used in religious texts to describe blasphemous grumbings or mutterings. Our ancestors must have looked at these shape-shifting, gossipy swarms and thought something devilish about them, but today we appreciate their beauty. Indeed, few sights are as striking. Flocks seems to move as one, changing direction on a whim and staying yet perfectly intact. They rise, plummet, drift apart and coalesce, pulsing like a living organ.

If you want to see a murmuration, the best displays are to be seen on clear calm days, just around sunset. Starling numbers peak between November and late January. A cosmopolitan bird by nature, huge flocks can be found in places as diverse as woodlands, reedbeds, city centres and coastal resorts. Murmuration chasers can find their nearest potential site at dedicated websites or head to your local nature reserve.

Ferns

If you want to time-travel, look no further than a woodland fern. These incredible plants are spectacularly old. Evolving more than 300 million years ago, ferns watched dinosaurs come and go, and mass extinctions, quietly flourishing while the world boiled and froze. Their success lay partly in the ingenious way they reproduce. Ferns don’t flower, they send out spores. These tiny particles could float huge distances on the wind, and remain dormant for decades, giving the fern a fighting chance in a chaotic landscape. Some species of fern evolved to be evergreen, giving life and shape to the forest floor even in the depths of autumn and winter. Others learned to slowly die back, only to spring back the following year. As their new fronds unfurl, the tips of these ferns resemble the head of a violin. No wonder these extraordinary plants earned the folk names ‘fiddleheads’ and ‘croziers’, after a bishop’s curved crook.

