



Every



Day



Nature



How noticing nature can quietly change your life

Andy Beer



OCTOBER

‘October 26, 1783. Wonderful and lovely to the imagination are the colours of our wood landscapes at this time of year.’
(*The Natural History of Selborne*, Gilbert White).

October can be gentle and fine. A few days of still frost turn the leaves amber and deep red. On the high chalky ridges, beech woods take on an ethereal orange tone.

Overhead, the V-shaped lines of winter geese flying in remind us that further north the winter has arrived already. The last of the swallows head hurriedly southward, hunting for winter warmth.

Yet October can be wild too, settling into a pattern where storms trundle in from the west with barely a pause between, before the arrival of Hallowe’en – the start of the dark days.

Left: Shaggy inkcap mushrooms and bracken.

1 OCTOBER | GEESE

Geese! A long, ragged 'V' of birds writes their way south and westward across the grey page of sky. Some of these birds will have flown this way every October for 30 years, often with their lifelong partner. Mr and Mrs Goose are coming home for winter.

This is an ancient ritual. Autumn is about arrivals as well as departures, and these geese have come from Siberia, Greenland, Spitsbergen or the high Arctic tundra. They are escaping the frozen wastes to spend the winter on damp, lush, British grass.

They may be barnacle geese, whose autumn appearance was once so mysterious it was believed that they emerged from the folded, blue-grey goose barnacle that you sometimes find on long-lost pieces of driftwood. Or, they might be white-fronted geese, once common along parts of the Severn Vale.

It doesn't matter. Just call them geese. Save the identification for another day. Nothing lifts my spirits more as the days begin to shorten. Look up, welcome some old friends coming back in search of wet meadows and mild winters, honking hello as they fly past.

2 OCTOBER | SALT-MARSH

We are blessed with these amazing places around much of our coast and it is not only the geese that love the low, flat landscape of a salt-marsh.

Salt-marshes are the dank places of Dickens novels, 'dark, flat, wilderness ... intersected with dykes and mounds and gates, with scattered cattle feeding on it'. (*Great Expectations*, Charles Dickens, 1861.)

They can look bleak, but spend any time near one and they will beguile you. They are neither land nor sea. They are a place of reflections and ever-changing light.

From above you can see the complex, brain-like pattern of channels that fill and drain twice a day, sheltering the coast from storms and providing a wonderful home for wading birds and geese.

If you are not already an addict then October is a great time to learn to love a salt-marsh.

3 OCTOBER | SWAN

There are other water birds flying south for the winter. You may see swans flying in as well.

If you do, then make sure that you stop and listen. They fly fast and straight, with necks held determinedly forward, and huge white wings that make a whooping sound with each flap.

Our mute swans, all protected by the Crown, spend the whole year with us. They have orange bills and don't tend to say very much. They adorn our rivers with graceful white necks and beautifully folded wings.

In autumn they are joined by two rarer, yellow-billed swans. It was the smaller of these, the Bewick's swan, that provided inspiration for the great conservationist Peter Scott who noticed that he could tell each individual visitor at Slimbridge from the unique patterns on their beaks.

Once you know, like Scott, that each swan is



part of a lifelong couple that come back here year after year from the Russian Arctic fringe, then you can't help but think about the world a little differently.

4 OCTOBER | NAVIGATION

How do these birds make their incredible journeys each year? For long-lived birds like geese and swans, there is the advantage that the youngsters can follow an experienced navigator.

But there is something else at play here. Some birds have a sixth sense, which gives them the ability to detect the Earth's magnetic field to help them navigate, and is thought to relate to a specific protein in their eye. This allows them to fly accurately along the same routes each year.

5 OCTOBER | GIANT PUFFBALL FUNGUS

The grassy common on the hill looks like someone has abandoned a whole load of white footballs in the night.

These are giant puffballs, another of our amazing fungi. It is tempting to give them a kick, but it is better to leave them for others to enjoy.

They feel leathery, just like an old football, and if you can find one that has split apart you will find a dense mass of mushy flesh.

Like most fungi, they reproduce by releasing microscopic spores into the air, and a puffball doesn't want to take any chances. The big puffball in front of me may contain a trillion spores.

6 OCTOBER | LADYBIRD

Apparently from nowhere, there are suddenly dozens of ladybirds huddled in the corner of the window frame. They are in defensive formation, like a phalanx of Roman soldiers armed with tightly packed shields.

It feels like the last dying day of summer and the ladybirds are in the air too. They are not really shaped like a creature that can fly, but they have more than a little poise when on the wing, unlike some of their other beetle relatives.

These are harlequin ladybirds and they come in many colours – black on red, red on black, yellow and cream – but they all share distinctive yellow-brown legs which are obvious in the low autumn sun through the window. They only arrived in Britain in 2004; they are native to the eastern part of Asia – Japan and Russia.

If you see a red one with seven spots then you are looking at something else. This is the original native seven-spot ladybird, wearing a red cloak like the Virgin Mary and with seven spots to mark her seven joys and seven sorrows.

Harlequin ladybirds are a source of sorrow to some – they eat other ladybirds – but today I take joy in their sheer abundance and array of colour.

7 OCTOBER | SLOE BERRY

The same place where you found blackthorn blossom in spring is now a very good place to look for sloes, the blackthorn fruit, as long as the birds haven't got there before you.

One of my favourite things is to pick a sloe berry and slowly rub the blue blush from the fruit with my finger to reveal the shiny purple beneath.

They taste like one of those tablets that you can't swallow, and when held in your mouth has a bitter flavour that robs you of saliva.

Yet, with a bit of work, you can extract the most delicious flavour from them. Now is a good time to make your sloe gin for Christmas, or sloe wine if you are so minded.

If you are organised you will be ready to offer up the perfect hedgerow Christmas present, sloe gin and elderflower tonic. Unbeatable.

8 OCTOBER | CRANEFLY

Everyone knows a daddy long-legs, the insect of early autumn, a great gangly thing with barely attached legs.

They end up inside our houses at this time of year, flying aimlessly across windows or getting stuck in spiders' webs.

They also go by the name of crane fly, and there are over 300 varieties in this country. At this time of year we see the common variety with a black-tipped tail, but earlier in the summer there are some more exciting ones around – including the tiger crane fly with brilliant yellow and black patterns.

9 OCTOBER | FIRST FROST

The first proper frost of autumn changes the scene. Some of the summer flowers that have been hanging on as the days shorten are suddenly reduced to withered husks.

Until now it has looked as if most of the leaves are still green, but overnight the frost seems to have changed that and I notice more yellows and browns among the canopy.

The average length of time between the last frost of spring and the first frost of autumn is one of the ways that we define the growing season for agriculture. It's another marker date for the diary.

10 OCTOBER | CUCKOO PINT

Remember where you found those arum leaves in the spring? Go back there and they may well have transformed into something else.

The fruit of the arum plant is a spike of bright red berries standing proudly in the hedgerow, which has given the plant a host of very rude old folk names.

These berries are poisonous and can irritate the skin, mouth and throat, but there are very few cases of serious harm.

Early arrow leaves, a strange flower and dramatic berries – this is a plant of transmutation.



11 OCTOBER | SPINDLE TREE

To say that spindle trees are nondescript is an understatement. They are a native tree that crops up sparsely in hedgerows and occasionally on a woodland edge. They have ordinary-looking leaves, tiny flowers and bark that lacks any distinctiveness, although the wood was once valued for making spinning materials and knitting needles.

Suddenly in October, the spindle leaps unexpectedly on to the dance floor with psychedelic berries in bright pink that split open to reveal bright orange seeds.

Within a week or two, the spindle will join the autumn colour parade by turning deep red, and then it will settle quietly into the background for another year.

12 OCTOBER | CONKER

Carry a conker in your pocket. Go on, don't be self-conscious. They are amazing and tactile seeds, burnished deep brown like an old dining table. There is nothing quite like carrying a bit of autumn around with you, and this will force you to go and find a tree and stamp on a spiky green seedcase in the hope of finding the perfect companion.

My memory of conkers is of having a very sore elbow: if you miss with a particularly powerful swing then the consequence is a bruising blow somewhere on your forearm. That and the sight of soft cream flesh spiralling upwards as you drill a hole through the hard case.

They remind me most of a Japanese netsuke, carved toggles with holes in that were designed to fasten a kimono. Small, smooth and highly tactile, conkers give you something to fiddle with if you are one of those people who can't keep their hands still. Who needs a netsuke when you can choose your own unique conker?

13 OCTOBER | BEECH WOOD

Take an autumn trip to the woods. My favourite at this time of year is a beech wood, a favourite of the Victorians, often planted as a feature on downs or hillsides.

An October beech wood is a wonder of tone and texture. The trees have smooth, grey, elephant-skin bark and the leaves cast such a heavy shade that barely anything grows beneath.

The leaves turn gently from green to amber and then brown, before falling to make a deep leaf litter which cloaks the woodland floor.

14 OCTOBER | WALL

I love a stone wall in autumn. The one I can see is falling down, but it is bright with moss covered in yellow-flowering stalks. The base of the wall is lined with a thatch of long grass, dotted with the odd fallen stone and the remnants of hogweed and campion.

The stones are covered with patches of white lichen and the occasional patch of black, sometimes in intersecting circles. The stones still hold the summer warmth and there are holes and cracks that offer shelter for mice, butterflies and beetles and countless more creatures.

This is the place where I saw a lizard, serpent-still then skittering, on the hottest August summer day. She is doubtless now tucked up warm for a winter sleep in among the crevices between the stones.

15 OCTOBER | HOLLOW TREE

If you haven't been inside a hollow tree then find an excuse to sneak inside while no one is looking – it's an amazing experience.

Parklands are the best place to find ancient and hollow trees. Here, large old trees have space to spread without competition for light or nutrients from surrounding youngsters.

On this day, an anniversary of the Great Storm more than 30 years ago, it is useful to notice our great hollow trees and remember why we should look after them.

Hollowness may be a sign of old age, but it doesn't mean that the tree is ill, dying or unsafe. In fact, often the opposite is true. Once

a tree has reached its full height it doesn't have much use for the heartwood at the centre of its stem. All of the living tissue is around the outside, so it's a good plan to let your resident fungi eat this core in exchange for all the nutrients you need for a quiet old age.

Hollow trees can live in this state for hundreds of years and they are not even likely to fall over – during that storm of 1987 countless healthy-looking trees were felled like matchsticks while old, hollow oaks remained standing.

16 OCTOBER | LEAF COLOUR

The leaves are really starting to turn now. They are mostly still holding on tight to the trees, but shorter days and the first frosts are creating a range of leaf colours.

In New England, on the eastern seaboard of the USA, this time of year is the start of the leaf-peeping season. Our woods can certainly put on a show to match as our native trees get ready for winter.

The leaves are turning because deciduous trees no longer need the green chlorophyll to make food to grow. They start to withdraw it from the leaves while settling down for winter hibernation.

What remains is the underlying leaf colour: the yellow of field maple, dogwood red, coppery beech and all shades between. The result is a week or two of the most beautiful shades – even longer if the weather is still and the nights cold.

17 OCTOBER | NORTH STAR

It's a clear, moonlit night and it's time to get out for a winter run in the dark. It would be much easier to flop down on the sofa and turn up the fire, but I know that a blast of winter air is what I really need.

The route outwards is due north, and high up in the sky ahead of me I can see the distinctively shaped seven-star constellation of the Plough.

This is one of the easiest constellations to learn as all of the stars shine quite brightly. As the evening passes, it rotates in the northern sky and to me it looks like a wide saucepan with a kink in the handle. The two stars on the outer rim of the pan point directly towards the faint North Star.

There is no longer much need for star navigation, but it feels like a lovely thing to know nonetheless. One of my favourite stories is the escape of Shackleton's crew to South Georgia across 800 nautical miles (almost 1,500km) of ocean, guided by the brilliant star navigation of Frank Worsley.

Worsley had to rely on the stars of the Southern Hemisphere, so the Plough was not there to help him. Tonight's journey is not as dramatic; time to turn round and head southerly home.

18 OCTOBER | SHAGGY INKCAP MUSHROOM

The mown grass by the roadside is covered in lawyer's wigs.

These are shaggy inkcap mushrooms, emerging from the lush grass like a torpedo and then fanning out into broad, shaggy-scaled umbrellas with a trailing ink edge.

As with an iceberg, where nine-tenths lies below the waterline, most of the action with fungi takes place beneath the ground.

Within the soil are huge networks called mycelium, root-like threads of fungus which seek out and extract nutrients from the soil. The largest of these – quite brilliantly named the 'humongous fungus' – is a single organism that covers an area of nearly 4 sq. miles (10 sq. km) in Oregon, USA.

It's a mast year – the term for a bumper season of fruit from our oak trees. We are picking up handfuls of green-brown acorns from the track in the woods. They have a discoloured base where they have parted from their perfect little acorn cups.

Acorns are almost as tactile as a conker and lots of things love to eat them. The trees seem to have flooded the market in the hope that a few are trampled into the ground and survive.

Acorns were once a large part of the human diet, and in some places the right of 'pannage' – the chance to feed acorns to your pigs – was once one of the most important common rights.

20 OCTOBER | LOMBARDY POPLAR

We have many fewer orchards than we used to and perhaps many fewer Lombardy poplars as a result.

They were once planted as shelter trees for orchards and they grow exceptionally fast – 6ft (1.8m) or more in a season.

Like the other poplar trees, the white poplar and our very scarce black poplar, they are probably not a tree to plant in your garden. They throw out hundreds of suckers from their roots and spread wildly. In America they are called cottonwood trees because of their wind-blown seeds.

Like sheep, they look best at a distance. A few marking a hill-top conjure images of cypresses in Tuscany as they stand tall and slim on the horizon.

Pick an apple from the tree. They don't appear to have psychedelic qualities, but nothing takes you through the looking glass of nature faster than eating a crunchy English apple.

It is our humble fruit, resident of lunch boxes and filler of crumbles. At this time of year you can celebrate 'apple day', which gives you the chance to taste dozens of different types of apples. You can crush some fresh juice or even, like me, attempt the manufacture of questionable cider.

Yet, the domestic apple hails, it is thought, not from an English orchard or hedgerow, but from high up in the fruit forests of the Tian Shan mountains of China and Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan.

It turns out that we can enjoy sweet apples because brown bears have a sweet tooth too: over the course of thousands of years, choosy bears favoured the trees with the sweetest apples. An apple seed eaten by a bear passes straight through its gut and has a good chance of germinating.

At some point in the distant past, people discovered these apples high up in the western fringe of the Himalayas and transported them all over the world. They now play a big role in many cultures.



It's one of those stormy days with a cold north-westerly wind that is trundling heavy showers across the plain towards us.

In between the rain, the low sun turns the sky a deep purple-grey. Against this dark backdrop comes a sudden flash of white. There it is again – lapwings, a flock of them, swinging in unison against the flint breeze.

In winter lapwings, with their long crests on their heads and their smart, iridescent feathers, gather together on farmland and marsh.

These birds, more commonly called the peewit after their call, are waders that have moved into our fields. They were once commonplace in the landscape. Now, a flock of lapwings is something to hope for over a ploughed field on a chill winter's day.

It is time to roar like a stag: the deer rut is in full swing.

Bolting is the sport of roaring like a deer, in the hope of receiving an answer from a stag. On the Eastern Moors above Sheffield, it is an annual contest, with points awarded for volume, authenticity and every stag reply.

The deer rut is the process by which the pecking order of a deer herd is established, with the dominant males earning the right to mate with the females. It's a time of year to give deer a wide berth as the males are spoiling for a fight.

The deer rut happens in our parklands too. Here the fallow deer also live in large herds and the start of autumn is the season for noisy displays, posturing and rutting.

A big October storm has scattered leaves beneath the trees, forming little piles against the exposed roots.

It's time to tip your cap to nature's tidying-up brigade: the decomposers. Like it or not, everything in nature is anchored to the circle of life. It is the decomposers that join up the bottom of the circle.

The fallen leaves are a chance to get to work. On a lawn you can sometimes see a leaf poking vertically into the grass where an earthworm is busy tugging it below the surface. Turn over a heap of leaves after a few days and it will be full of woodlice and millipedes and the tiny little larvae of gnats and flies.

The fungi are at work too. In an old leaf pile you may find the thin, white fungal hyphae strung between the leaves. There are slime moulds at work too. Within a year the leaves will have become part of the woodland floor – a dark, rich leaf mould, full of goodness to power a burst of new growth each spring.

Lots of our conifer trees have been introduced from elsewhere, but the Scots pine is one of only three native conifers (along with the juniper and yew).

It was once widespread, colonising from Europe after the last Ice Age, and in Scotland ancient trees survive as fragments of the great Caledonian Forest.

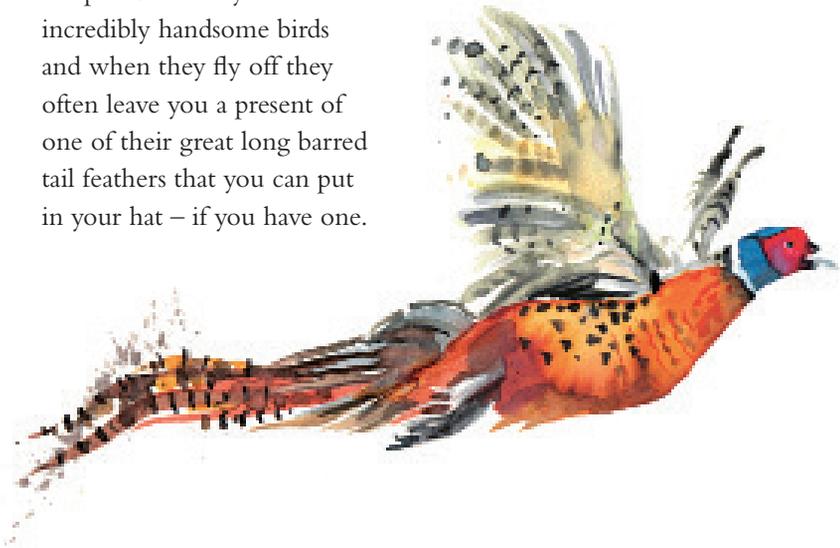
When oak was used to build naval ships, Scots pine provided the timber for the masts and spars – tall, straight and flexible – and the resin to caulk the planks.

Pine trees are hard to tell apart, but if you see one beside a field or in a churchyard then a guess of 'Scots pine' is usually a good bet.

26 OCTOBER | PHEASANT

Pheasants are so commonplace in some parts of the country that it is hard to imagine that they are only here to be shot. Each year nearly 40 million pheasants are released into the landscape. The first pheasants were introduced nearly a thousand years ago from the mountains of Georgia, but the more common varieties now hail from western China.

Put aside your thoughts on shooting for a moment and appreciate the pheasant. They are incredibly handsome birds and when they fly off they often leave you a present of one of their great long barred tail feathers that you can put in your hat – if you have one.



27 OCTOBER | WINTER FIELD

It is time for a long walk along the footpath beside huge ploughed fields.

Once the fields would have lain bare all winter with a short stubble beard, ready for ploughing in the spring. Now the seed drill usually follows the harvester and so the field is already covered with the soft green covering of next year's crop.

This is one of those lovely fields with a large, wide flower margin and there are a few still blooming despite the frost. Field speedwell trails pale blue among the young crops and the groundsel still bears a yellow bloom or two among the seedheads.

Jackdaws float in lazy packs in the distance and the occasional pheasant squawk shatters the silence.

28 OCTOBER | SUCCESSION

The leaves have fallen now and you can start to pick up the structure of the landscape more clearly.

The hills above the town are cloaked in woodland which creates a timeless scene. Yet it's not timeless at all. On the old maps and photographs much of this hill was crew-cut-short, sheep-grazing country and the Bronze Age burial mound at the top commanded views across the vale.

Imperceptibly, the hawthorn has spread from the hedgerows to create scrubby woodland, which in turn is slowly being overtopped by sycamore, oak and maple. This is the process of succession, which in most cases leads to fields 'tumbling down to woodland'.

Yet, we now think that the ancient landscape was shaped by another strong force as well. Succession pushes one way and grazing pushes the other. Not too far back into history these woods were filled with big grazing animals: elk, an ancient cow called an auroch, ponies, wild boar and deer that would have created large, open areas. Maybe the burial mound always commanded a terrific view.

29 OCTOBER | LONDON PLANE

Plane trees have the best bark of any tree there is. That's it, no discussion needed. It flakes into a pattern like sand and mud at the base of a dried-up lake.

These hybrid trees are tough as old boots and they line streets with maple-like leaves and statuesque stems. If a nightingale ever did sing in Berkeley Square, it was most likely from one of the tallest plane trees.

They are a mixture of the American and Oriental plane and they were probably imported from Spain in the seventeenth century. The oldest of the London planes, at Barn Elms in south-west London, dates from the 1680s.

They also pepper Lancelot 'Capability' Brown landscapes like a signature – stop to admire a view and you may well find yourself beneath an ancient plane, planted there by the genius landscape-maker himself.

30 OCTOBER | FUNGI NAMES

For the last 15 years or so the experts at the British Mycological Society have had a special working party to select English names for some of the 15,000 fungi that are found in the UK.

The strictly written protocol notes that 'word play has also been possible on occasion and provides one of the best means of reflecting British culture'.

No kidding. Look at this selection ...

Pavement mushroom · bearded fieldcap · pink disco · snakeskin grisette · false deathcap · destroying angel · upper crust · club foot · hair sedge smut · purple jellydisc · powdery piggyback · barometer earthstar · the pretender · the humpback · dewdrop dapperling · golden navel · devil's fingers · mealy frosted funnel · lentil shanklet · tiger's eye · distinguished inkcap · bug sputnik · cinnamon jellybaby · King Alfred's cakes · snaketongue truffleclub · funeral bell · twisted deceiver · chicken of the woods · bald knight · cryptic bonnet · vampires bane · hotlips · Jack O'lantern · bonfire cauliflower · the flirt · powdercap strangler · plums and custard

31 OCTOBER | HALLOWE'EN

I love the fact that our culture is a bit of a hodgepodge. This time of year is one of the best examples.

People in parts of these islands used to mark this night as the Celtic festival of Samhain, the night where the boundaries between the living and the dead became blurred. The invading Romans brought us two festivals that happened around this time of year, including the tradition of honouring Pomona, the fruit goddess.

The Christians rebranded this night All Hallows' Eve, which, to be honest, sounds a lot less fun.

Nonetheless, nineteenth-century English and Irish emigrants took the idea to the USA and they have now exported it back to us, with added pumpkins.

Whichever way you spin it, all of this partying is really about the turning of the year. It is the end of harvest and the beginning of the dark months. A time to dress up like a Celt, bob apples like a Roman and eat pumpkin pie like a true American.