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Earth Almanac: September/October 2004

By Ted Williams

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Wild Jack-o'-Lanterns

After the first heavy rains of fall, dead trees and roots east of the Rockies suddenly bloom with clusters of spectacular fungi. The bright orange-and-yellow jack-o'-lantern mushroom, which may have a stalk eight inches high and a cap eight inches in diameter, is bioluminescent. Pick a few, then take them into a darkened room and note the eerie green light glowing around the gills. It's caused by waste products from the mycelium—that vegetative part of the fungus reaching, in a mass of threads, deep into the decaying wood. Also note the delicious fragrance, and remember that odor is an especially unreliable test for edibility. If you eat a jack-o'-lantern mushroom, you won't die—you'll just wish you would. But this fungus also is a potential lifesaver, yielding a substance recently formulated by researchers into a powerful anticancer drug.

Danger in the Flowers

If you find yourself in a field of blooming goldenrod or other fall wildflowers most anywhere in the United States or Canada, be on the lookout for ambushers that grasp with mantislike front legs, inject paralyzing digestive fluid, then suck out liquefied internal tissues. If you're bitten, you'll retain your innards, but insects up to twice the size of the half-inch-long ambush bug may not. Most ambush bug species are yellow and brown or yellow and black, and shaped like an hourglass. Favored prey includes bees, flies, wasps, and butterflies. Ambush bugs are most easily found in early autumn, when they've attained their largest size; often they are given away by the bodies of prey they're holding, which seem to hang limply from flowers.

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Leaping or Sleeping

While other rodents are packing granaries with seeds and nuts, the meadow jumping mouse is packing on calories to sustain it through one of the longest and most profound winter sleeps in the animal kingdom. It may not wake for eight months; sometimes, if it hasn't stored sufficient fat and the winter is hard, it may not wake up at all. As fall approaches, it ceases its nomadic lifestyle and constructs a snug den lined with shredded grass and leaves, and one to three feet underground. Then, usually before late September, it curls into a ball, wraps its long tail around its shoulders, drops its body temperature from about 99 degrees Fahrenheit to just above freezing, and never moves till spring. Meadow jumping mice are solitary and not nearly as abundant as other rodents. But you have a good shot at seeing one during the pre-denning feeding frenzy of early fall. Look for them at night in meadows, old fields, marshes, stream corridors, and forest edges. Startle one and it may jump five feet, using its tail for balance.

Steam Queen

If you live in the Great Lakes states south to the Gulf Coast and hang out in low, wet places, sooner or later you'll meet the queen snake—most likely when you startle it and it drops into the water from overhanging brush. Autumn is a good time to search, because newborn young, no longer than a pencil and just as thin, are patrolling warm, shallow streams in search of juvenile crawfish, especially freshly molted ones. Adult queen snakes, which can reach three feet, prey principally on crawfish, too. At first glance, this beautiful, slender water snake resembles the garter snake, but it is easily identified because it's the only species in its range with four brown stripes on its belly. In addition to these stripes, juveniles and young adults have dorsal and side stripes, which can give the impression of seven stripes. Hence the generic name: *Regina septemvittata* (queen with seven stripes).

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Photography by McCloskey/Peter Arnold

Whistling Goblin

On moonlit autumn nights look for the northern saw-whet owl—a tiny, bright-eyed goblin no heavier than a robin but puffier and wearing a perpetually startled expression on its round face. Now, frequently quartering against west winds, saw-whets drift south from northern and middle latitudes across the United States and Canada, roosting by day in low foliage. Fittingly, migration peaks around Halloween. The best way to find roosts is to search the ground under conifers for "whitewash" and regurgitated pellets of bones and fur. Usually, you can approach to within two or three feet of a roosting bird, and it won't flush. Instead, it will seem to melt into the tree trunk, elongating its body and folding one wing around itself. The saw-whet's name derives from its skew alarm call, which sounds like a file being drawn across a saw blade. But the owl's more common vocalization is a monotonous whistle, heard during courtship and resembling the backup alarm on a dump truck. One of the few raptors that's known to cache food, the saw-whet may kill half a dozen deer mice in rapid succession, tuck them away in secure hiding places, and then, when times are lean, thaw the carcasses with its body heat, "brooding" them as if they were eggs.