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## Earth Almanac: September/October 2007

By Ted Williams

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Joel Sartore

### The Ricing Moon

For thousands of years “wild rice”—an annual grass rich in proteins and carbohydrates, low in fat, and unrelated to the bland, white rice you buy at the supermarket—has sustained people and wildlife west and north of the Great Lakes. Within its natural range, no food is more important to waterfowl, and it becomes available to them when they most need it—just before migration. In Minnesota a joint project by the state Department of Natural Resources and Ducks Unlimited provides for intensive water-level management on some wild rice lakes. For the Ojibway, the “ricing moon” of late August and September was cause for wild celebration. On the night before the harvest the chief offered prayers and thanks to the Great Spirit. In the morning the women bent the grain heads over canoes and beat the seeds from the stalks. Some seeds were allowed to fall into the water to maintain the rice bed for the following year. The Ojibway and others still harvest and sell wild rice, but now there is widespread commercial production of a cultivar that, while inferior in taste, can withstand the stress of mechanical harvesters. You can gather wild rice yourself in Minnesota, but first you’ll need to buy a license from the DNR.

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Ed Reschke/Peter Arnold, Inc.

## Brilliant and Delicious

From New Brunswick to Minnesota and south to Georgia and Alabama, dry uplands blaze with the scarlet leaves and cone-shaped berry clusters of staghorn sumac. This fast-growing, weak-limbed shrub protects itself from browsing ungulates with dense hairs that cover twigs, giving them the appearance of stag antlers in velvet. The berries, which stay on the plant till spring, aren't particularly relished by birds early in the season, but as other food sources disappear they look better and better. The Indians made a lemonade-type drink from the berries, and you can, too. But make sure they're ripe, or the brew will be green and bitter. 1. Pour cold water over berry clusters. 2. Crush thoroughly. 3. Let sit until strength is to your liking. 4. Strain through cheesecloth. 5. Add sugar as desired.

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George Grall/National Aquarium in Baltimore

## Voices From the Deep

From Cape Cod to Texas, Atlantic croakers are spawning in bays, estuaries, and open water. The loud croaking you hear when you lift these fish from the water results from "sonic muscles"—vibrating air-filled swim bladders. Mostly it's a response to fear, but males also croak to court females. Courtship vocalization has been thought to occur in a series of one to three pulses, while fright vocalization—produced by both sexes—ranged from one to nine pulses and was repeated much more frequently. Now is an especially good time to fish for these ubiquitous bottom feeders using small hooks baited with seaworms or pieces of squid. A large croaker might measure only 20 inches, but what the species lacks

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in size it makes up for in flavor. If you find it hard to kill a talking fish, you can always let it go. But first take the time to admire it and, of course, hear it out.

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Kim Taylor/NPL/Minden Pictures

## Spider Dance

Tarantulas, the world's largest spiders, rarely venture outside their burrows in daylight and are therefore difficult to find—except now, when males go courting. Your best chance of finding one of these docile creatures is in southwestern deserts, where most of the roughly 40 species inhabiting the United States abide. Our tarantulas are relatively small, usually with leg spans of less than four inches—puny compared with the goliath tarantula that has an 11-inch leg span and provides a lobsterlike meal to South American aborigines who then use its fangs for toothpicks. Should you be seized with the urge to pick up and fondle a tarantula, resist. This way you'll avoid getting bitten or stuck with the irritating, barbed hairs that a threatened spider will brush onto your skin with its hind legs. These mini quills are best removed with sticky tape. If you are bitten, learned medical authorities have recommended (though not recently) that you dance wildly until exhausted. Such exercise was thought to cure "tarantism," an imagined firestorm of the nervous system from which tarantulas derived their name. Since tarantula venom is considerably less toxic than that of bees, the cure never seemed to fail.

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Joel Sartore

## Newborn Snakes

Now, throughout most of the West, western rattlesnakes are giving birth to pencil-thin, pencil-long young. The babies—there may be as many as 25 to a litter—arrive without rattles. But they collect a ring each time they shed, usually about once a year. The old skin is turned inside out as the snake struggles from it, and the curled remnant lodges against a button at the tip of the tail. Adult rattlesnakes are nonaggressive, often refusing to strike and sometimes withholding their venom when they do. Disturb a newborn, however, and it will strike repeatedly, almost always injecting venom if it makes contact. There are eight highly variable subspecies of western rattlesnakes, but all are small (generally under four feet) and all have triangular heads, vertical pupils, narrow necks, and a deep, heat-sensing pit between their nostrils.

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Steve Toon/NHPA

## Winged Hobgoblins

As summer wanes, barn owls in colder parts of their range move toward warmer latitudes. You may encounter these medium-size raptors most anywhere as they flutter mothlike over low, open country, backlit by moon and stars, white breasts and underwings flickering in the glow of streetlights. Barn owls, among the most widespread of all land birds, occur on every continent save Antarctica. In North America they are the sole representatives of the Tytonidae family. Unlike the young of our other owls (Strigidae), which compete viciously and sometimes kill one another, juvenile barn owls may help feed younger siblings. Barn owls also differ from the Strigidae in that their nesting is triggered more by availability of prey than time of year. Corner a barn owl, and it will hiss, bob, clack its beak, screech, lunge, and eject vile-smelling feces. From such behavior, along with its otherworldly appearance, the species has acquired such names as "ghost owl," "death owl," and "hobgoblin owl." For American Indians, no portent of doom was more horrifying than having a barn owl perch on one's tepee. When this happened the owner would sometimes fulfill the omen by pining away and dying.

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