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Earth Almanac: September/October 2008

By Ted Williams

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Bill Beatty

The Last Word

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Most other frogs stop talking in autumn, but the green frog, which abounds from the East Coast as far west as the Great Lake states and east Texas, can't quite shut up. Males are far quieter now than in spring and summer, when they were more aggressively defending territories and trying to call in females, but they still insist on getting the last word. They'll sit for hours, leaving the long, cool evenings to the crickets and katydids, then suddenly announce their presence to the world with a loud banjo twang. The tadpoles frequently endure at least one winter before transformation, so if you see one at this time of year, chances are it's a juvenile green frog, although another good possibility is the slightly larger, slightly less abundant bullfrog. The one sure way to determine between adults of these strikingly similar species is by the two ridge lines that run down each side of the green frog's back. Like bullfrogs, green frogs are voracious predators, glutting themselves on insects, fish, crayfish, other frogs, and even small snakes, mammals, and birds. You can feed green frogs by loosely attaching a piece of fish or meat to a string and dancing it in front of them. If the morsel is large, they'll stuff it into their mouths with their "hands."



Sumo Harada/Minden Pictures

Stocking Up

In steppes, foothills, and alpine meadows throughout the West, yellow-bellied marmots, a.k.a. "rockchucks," are stuffing themselves with herbs and other green plants. Rockchucks that don't put on sufficient fat now will die during hibernation—frequently a more strenuous ordeal than that faced by their close eastern relatives, woodchucks (whether or not they see their shadows on February 2). A hibernating rockchuck can lose half its fall body weight. If weight loss becomes critical, it may avoid starvation by awakening before the growing season and feeding on twigs, a poor but better bet for survival. Moderate grazing by cattle or wild ungulates benefits rockchucks by removing grass and thereby encouraging the herbs they prefer. Except where they're hunted as alleged "varmints," they keep bankers' hours. Look for them at mid-morning and late afternoon as they sun themselves and forage. Listen for them, too. Alarmed rockchucks utter loud chucks, whistles, and trills. Those making most of the noise are animals that have already run back to their dens.

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Steve Harper/Grant Heilman Photography

Fruity Favorites

Throughout most of the East and much of the West, dense thickets of American plum shrubs are the candy-stocked closets in which countless species of birds and mammals feast in safety before their long winter naps, fasts, or southward flights. To the human palate the red-skinned, yellow-fleshed fruit is somewhat bitter when eaten raw, but baked with sugar it can be made into delicious jams, jellies, and fruit roll-ups. And, as American Indians discovered long ago, it can be dried for future use. Concoctions made from the root bark have been and, to some extent, still are used as a mouthwash to treat oral sores, an astringent and disinfectant for skin lacerations, a cough syrup, and a diuretic to ease kidney and bladder ailments. Superb brooms can be fashioned by binding together the tough, elastic twigs. And while virtually all American plums are planted to attract wildlife or as ornamentals, they are widely used as rootstock for cultivated plums.



Robert Royse

Sam Who?

When hardwood leaves glow yellow and scarlet, white-throated sparrows retreat to the sunny south. For some—especially adult males— this may mean Nova Scotia and Ontario. You'll see or hear whitethroats most anywhere in the East and along our entire West Coast. Immature and first-year females tend to migrate farther south. Winter groups, which may number as many as 50 birds, form dominance hierarchies and often mix with other sparrows. Watch as they kick and scratch for seeds. (They're especially fond of cracked corn.) And listen for the plaintive, melodious song; unlike that of most birds,

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it's delivered during fall and winter and by day as well as night (in French Canada the whitethroat is called *rossignol*, or "nightingale"). According to *Peterson's Birding by Ear* tapes, "New Englanders represent the white-throated sparrow's song as *Oh, Sam Peabody, Peabody, Peabody*, while their neighbors north of the border use *Oh, sweet Canada, Canada, Canada*." (With that the narrator offers this revelation: "Obviously, the bird is saying neither.") John James Audubon extolled yet another, if no longer legally enjoyed, virtue of this silver-throated, cold-weather visitor: "It is a plump bird, fattening almost to excess, whilst in Louisiana, and affords delicious eating."



Stephen Dalton/Minden Pictures

High-Ranking Butterfly

If you despair over the diminution of this planet's natural beauty, it's time to look for red admiral butterflies, which are about as far from endangered as any species gets. They abound in all of North America that isn't permanently frozen, in Central America south to Guatemala, in Asia as far east as Iran, and in most of Europe and north Africa. Fall is a good time to find these fidgety, gaudy insects because they migrate south, sometimes gathering in enormous numbers. Red admirals frequently land on people, a habit more welcome now than in the late 19th century, when prolific flights over Russia in 1881 gave the insect a reputation as a prognosticator of doom because they coincided with the assassination of Tsar Alexander II. Look closely at the markings on the underside of a perched red admiral's hind wing, and you may be able to read "1881." You'll find red admirals feeding on bird droppings and the nectar of composite meadow flowers such as aster, milkweed, and alfalfa. The butterflies you encounter now are probably from the season's second or third generation. When you see caterpillars living in tents made from silk and the leaves of willows, poplars, or elms, hold the spray and clippers. They might be red admiral larvae.

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Gary W. Carter/Corbis

Season's Sparklers

In early autumn, roadsides and meadow edges from Newfoundland to Saskatchewan and Florida to Nebraska explode in color as the orange, slipper-shaped blossoms of spotted jewelweed unfurl. Soon thereafter the ripe seedpods literally explode when jostled by beast or wind, sending seeds flying in all directions—hence the plant's alternate name: touch-me-not. American Indians ate the azure seeds, which taste like butternuts; birds and small mammals relish them, too. When white-footed mice hoard the seeds they stain their bellies blue. The name jewelweed comes from the water-repellent quality of the leaves, which causes dew and rain to bead up and sparkle in the sun. If you're afflicted by poison ivy, poison oak, or athlete's foot, relief may sometimes be had by crushing jewelweed stems and applying the sticky paste to affected areas. At times the plant can invade gardens, but in dismissing it as a "dreadful weedy nuisance," The New York Times elicited the ire of biology professor Mary Leck of Rider University in Lawrenceville, New Jersey. After citing many of the above attributes of this remarkable plant, Leck offered this: "On reflection, perhaps jewelweed is truly a potential deterrent to the gardener—it may offer too many distractions from gardening chores."

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Bill Beatty

Poke's Peak

As the growing season slows and the coolness of Indian summer settles from cobalt skies, pokeweed seems to leap out from meadow, fencerow, and roadside. Throughout the East and in the far West north to Oregon, this fast-growing perennial herb is suddenly about as tall as you, and its once-drab berry clusters have gone from green to spectacular purple. Birds, especially robins, towhees, mockingbirds, mourning doves, catbirds, and bluebirds, feast on this fruit, spreading seeds in their droppings and decorating your car, sidewalk, and outside furniture with purple stains. (Rain and sun sometimes removes them better than soap and water.) Concoctions from sundry parts of the plant are said to soothe the sore nipples of nursing mothers and ease symptoms of autoimmune diseases, tonsillitis, mumps, glandular fever, sprains, and cancer. Red pigment from the berries has been used as dye and ink. And in much of the plant's range, young shoots and leaves, collected earlier in the year when they're less toxic, are boiled with two water changes and eaten like spinach. Soon pokeweed may die back to the roots, and poke enthusiasts can dig and dice them, then cultivate a new supply of tender shoots in their cellars.

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Stephen Dalton/Minden Pictures

Carrion Committees

Throughout our cooler states turkey vultures are staging for migration, sometimes in huge aggregations known as "casts," "committees," "meals," "vortexes," or "wakes." In impressive numbers you'll see them in the South, too, as they ride thermals or orbit over carrion, wobbling on dihedral wings.

If Boris Karloff had produced *Sesame Street*, Big Bird would have been a turkey vulture. What can one say about a fowl that defecates on its legs (to cool itself or maybe kill bacteria); that, unlike most other birds, has a keen sense of smell that helps it home in on gas produced by decay; that may be seen peering down your chimney in search of body parts it has accidentally dropped into your fireplace; that woos mates by grunting; that hisses when threatened; that hoses down attackers with projectile vomit, and, if that fails, plays possum? Well, National Park Service biologist Elaine Leslie, who has worked extensively with turkey vultures, says this: "I did not feel truly indoctrinated as a biologist until literally sprayed with eau de parfum de decay—an experience that fostered my admiration and appreciation of this fine bird. How can one not love and respect this sadly misunderstood bird of the New World? Okay—so you're bald, pee on yourself, and gorge on dead and decaying flesh, and quite often you literally cannot get off the ground because of your greed. But you venture through your life free of disease, you are graceful in flight, your stork and ibis relatives are relatively revered. And your special way of surprising your assailants by regurgitating your putrid last meal—well, we could all learn from this gentler, kinder means of warfare! You are protected by international migratory bird treaties, and this protection you well deserve!"

Such appreciation for turkey vultures, particularly as it pertains to their role as sanitation crew, was once more common. For example, the bird's scientific name, *Cathartes aura*, means "golden purifier." And the Pueblo Indians, who considered the bird a symbol of purification, found its feathers useful for whisking evil humors from people and objects.