



# OCTOBER

It is during October that we feel the transition from often still quite warm days, howbeit cooler evenings, into the reality of ‘season of mists and mellow fruitfulness’, when mists rising above rivers and falling leaves tell us it is Autumn and temperatures can drop.

Keats’ poem *‘To Autumn’* which that most famous of lines opens (above) was really written about the beginnings of autumn in mid-September which is when he wrote it after a countryside walk. It is about the ripe fullness of the year and wild fruits, late flowers and “gathering swallows twittering in the skies”. Although he was only 24 it is particularly poignant for it was his autumn as a poet, it was his last poem, he was to die just 2 years later.

The full autumn of leaves changing colour and falling are encapsulated in the North American word “fall” for the season. Yet in Britain in the 16<sup>th</sup> century fall, autumn and harvest were all used interchangeably for the season.

Elm leaves turn a distinctive yellow, whilst field maple can be golden yellow to pink. The green photosynthetic pigment chlorophyll breaks down in broadleaved-trees in anticipation of being shed as day-length dwindles and temperatures fall. The more robust orange carotenoid photosynthetic pigment and yellow xanthophylls become seen and autumn colour appears. Anthocyanins become synthesised giving the red hues.

Hedgerow-harvest fruits are still abundant into October, but are increasingly devoured as the season progresses. Hawthorn, wild crab apple, elder, blackberry, rose-hips and spindle continue to add their rich colour to autumn walks. The shiny red berries of holly among shiny, spiky leaves heralds an even later season. It’s not just blackbirds gorging on berries and dormice, yellow-necked mice, woodmice and others feeding on hazel nuts, but people too have been eating blackberries and gathering sloes to make sloe-gin. Children root around under horse-chestnut trees searching for really good “conkers”. The brave (or those wearing gloves) will also root around looking for fallen sweet-chestnuts.

These should not be mistaken for horse chestnuts, for the edible sweet-chestnuts emerge from painfully spikey cases that resemble small green hedgehogs!

For naturalists walking the country by-ways there can be real interest in October in looking at nuts and fruit stones that have already been eaten by small mammals and birds. With hazel nuts nuthatches and woodpeckers batter their way in leaving untidy irregular holes. Small mammals are neater with gnawed holes. Wood mice and bank voles leave tooth marks across the rim of the hole, but whilst wood mice also leave small teeth marks where they rest their upper incisors around the outside of the hole, bank voles don’t leave those marks. Dormice produce neat holes with an almost polished rim without gnaw marks across the rim.



Sweet chestnut – *Castanea sativa*



Red deer – *Cervus elaphus*

Even if you live in London, in October you are still able to see and hear one of the most amazing wildlife scenes in Britain, the rut of both the red and fallow deer. In Richmond Park there are some 300 red and 350 fallow deer, where the males compete for the attentions of the females. Male reds are called stags, and male fallows are called bucks, and in both the beginning of the rut season starts as the males' necks swell. The sound of the calling buck is usually described as 'groaning' whilst the sound from the stag is called 'bellowing' or 'roaring'. The buck seeks to attract his does, whilst the stag protectively rounds up his hinds. The clashing of antlers against challenging males can be heard over a long distance.

The arrival back from mid-October on of the Whooper Swans is a welcome and noisy reminder that visiting wetlands over the forthcoming winter months will be well repaid by the amazing spectacle of over-wintering migrant waders and wildfowl.