



NOVEMBER

In Celtic Britain the festival of Samhain (November 1st) was seen as the beginning of the darker part of the year, and was the beginning of the Celtic year. (Its bonfires have transferred into the present day Bonfire Night of the 5th of November)

As clocks go back an hour at the end of October, humans enter even darker evenings! Plants and wild animals avoid that change, but the reduction in day-length combined with lowering temperatures has a profound effect on plants and animals.

Hedgehogs seem to be traditionalists for they have usually begun their annual hibernation on or about Bonfire Night. Unfortunately they construct their winter nests in preparation towards the end of October, so can move into heaps of wood that are put together ahead of November 5th.

Whilst many plants die back, and flowers are less, this is not so for all species. A member of the nettle family, pellitory-of-the-wall, comes into its main period of flowering in November. It grows at the base of old walls as its name suggests. It has separate male and female flowers, and the pollen from the male stamens unfortunately can trigger allergic reactions in many people.

Ivy too is in flower, and as an autumn flowering climber insects find nectar from September into November. During November once pollinated the ivy fruit forms.

Although we associate dragonflies with the warmth of summer, the has a particularly long flight period and the distinctive red-bodied males can be seen well on through the autumn. Some can be seen flying into November basking on fence posts, taking off flying around then landing back at the same spot. If you patiently hold out your finger nearby they may well land on it for minutes at a time before taking off again.



Common darter – *Sympetrum striolatum*

Mountain hares have been undergoing their autumn moult, and by the end of November they have become pure white. In size they are part way between the rabbit and the brown hare. (These latter were not found in post-glacial Britain when the English Channel filled, but there are numerous records from Iron Age sites 3,000 years ago, yet it seems that the mountain hare retreated to the uplands as the ice retreated and did not disappear so is claimed as being more truly native than the brown hare). Today mountain hares are found mainly in Scotland, but also in the Peak District and north Wales.

Another species that also goes almost totally white with upland snow cover is the ptarmigan. This is another survivor from the Ice Age and is found today in Scotland on only the highest mountains. (There is a further curious link between the two for the ptarmigan's Latin genus name is *Lagopus* from ancient Greek meaning 'hare-foot'! This is because the bird has white feathers over its feet that act as snow-shoes, as well as providing protection from the cold).

Across Britain our over-wintering thrushes, the redwing and fieldfare are now with us, but both are vulnerable to changing weather conditions and availability of wild fruits. They can be seen together now in mixed flocks feeding on hedgerow haws. Strangely these largely Scandinavian origin birds seem more vulnerable to bad weather conditions than their close relative, our garden blackbird. These Norse-land birds prefer wild fruits and are more wary of garden bird tables, whereas the more flexible blackbird's feeding habits help them survive.

At our wetland areas, especially coastal estuaries, over-wintering flocks of waders and wildfowl are a great draw for naturalists to see. The late autumn and early winter arrivals of waders in those estuaries are largely from key moulting areas for the birds, such as the Wadden Sea. The overwintering geese with us now are predominantly of Icelandic and Greenland origin whilst those from Russia appear later. November is the time we see overwintering duck appear, and on into December.