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102 Things to Do in Autumn

Written by Alex Quick

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102
THINGS TO DO IN AUTUMN

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THINGS TO DO IN AUTUMN

ALEX QUICK



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1.

WATCH STARLING MURMURATIONS

On autumn evenings, dark clouds begin to gather. But these clouds do not presage rain. They are clouds of living things: starlings. These birds have a talent for the extraordinary aerial ballets known as 'murmurations'. Thousands of them take to the skies and begin swooping over the landscape with rapid, breathtaking synchrony. As if guided by a single mind, they form cascading, pulsating masses, gather into clumps and clusters that constantly interact, shift and merge. It's one of nature's most extraordinary spectacles.

Why do they do it? There are several theories. One is that it's a defence against predators such as sparrowhawks or peregrine falcons. Predators are confused by the dancing displays and find it hard to focus on any particular bird. Another theory is

that it's a form of social behaviour, a way of sharing information about roosting opportunities or food. The truth is that no one knows for sure. Neither is it understood quite how birds separated by hundreds of feet seem to be able to change direction in perfect accord.

In autumn – from November onwards – starling murmurations begin, and they continue into winter. As the days shorten, native birds are swollen by migrants, creating the most spectacular displays. Popular sites to see starlings in the UK include Brighton Pier in Sussex and the Avalon Marshes in Somerset, where a million birds regularly take to the skies. Starling displays can be seen throughout Europe too, particularly in Italy.

Perhaps the mystery will be unravelled one day, but for now, it's enough just to watch and wonder.



2.

GET TO KNOW THE AUTUMN NIGHT SKY

If you don't know much about observing the stars, two things will help. First of all, get as far away from city lights as possible. Secondly, take a pair of binoculars. An expensive telescope is really not necessary to enjoy the stars, and binoculars are cheap, portable and manoeuvrable.

The night sky in autumn offers many interesting sights. The Plough (or Big Dipper) is probably the most familiar constellation, with its shape like a ladle: in autumn in the northern hemisphere it is low down and to the north. If you use it as a marker you can find many other points in the night sky. Start by drawing an imaginary line through the two stars on the right side of the cup of the ladle, and extend the line upwards. The first star you come to is Polaris, the north star,

around which all the other stars turn. Keep following the line up and you will come to Cassiopeia, perhaps the most recognisable constellation in the autumn sky: this forms a 'W' on its side. Now turn your attention to the south: here the main autumn constellation is Pegasus, which is an almost perfect square bounded to the right by several outlying legs. With binoculars it's possible to see several galaxies and galactic clusters in and around Pegasus.

Of course that's just the start. There are binary stars, blue-white supergiants, variable stars, globular clusters, supernovae and nebulae. The fine crisp nights of autumn are an ideal time to see and appreciate them.

3.

GORGE ON STINGING NETTLE SOUP

Stinging nettles are full of vitamins and minerals, and as long as you avoid the stings, they will generally make you live longer. However, you don't need to force them down like medicine. Nettles actually taste pretty good, rather like spinach with a hint of seafood. In fact, if you make nettle soup you will notice a rich, mouth-watering aroma, similar to boiling mussels.

It's best to use the young leaves for nettle soup. Nettles will put on new growth in autumn, so have a look for some plants with fresh-looking tips. Wearing gloves, pluck the top six inches or so of each plant, collecting enough to fill a carrier bag loosely.

There are many recipes for nettle soup, some of which sound like the proverbial 'stone soup'; however,

the nettles are not the useless magic stone, but a delicious ingredient in their own right. Try this recipe:

> Strip the leaves from the stalks, wash them and chop them. Now melt a generous knob of butter in a saucepan and add the nettles, softening them until they reduce and turn dark green. Add two medium-sized potatoes, chopped into cubes, and four soup-bowl's worth of lightly flavoured stock. Simmer for fifteen minutes. Finally, puree the broth in a blender. Serve with a swirl of cream and some black pepper.

Final tip: you can also make soup from dead nettles, the flowering cousins of stinging nettles. The flowers are also edible.



4.

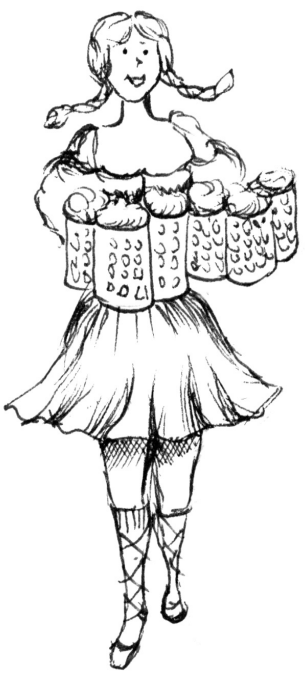
GO TO AN OKTOBERFEST

Oktoberfest is the carnival of lager, lederhosen, dirndls, pretzels, weisswurst and tubas held every year at the Theresienwiese in Munich, Germany. It is attended by around six-and-a-half million people annually. Generally, it's a relaxed and civilised celebration of Germanic culture, but since the beer at Oktoberfest is around 25% stronger than most other beers generally on sale, it also leads to the prolific creation of *Bierleichen*, or beer corpses – people lying on the ground in a drunken stupor.

One of the important things to note about the Oktoberfest is that it's not actually in October (though it is in autumn). It starts in mid-September and runs for sixteen days until the first Sunday in October, unless that first Sunday is before October 2nd, in which case it ends on October 3rd. Either way, the majority of Oktoberfest is always in September, so

don't wait until October to book tickets to Germany.

Oktoberfest is now a global franchise. The majority of Oktoberfest revelling, in terms of sheer numbers of people, is now held outside Germany. Oktoberfest-inspired celebrations take place in Canada, the USA, Australia, Argentina, Colombia, Chile, Brazil and Palestine, and so this autumn there is likely to be an Oktoberfest near you. One of the biggest is the Oktoberfest of Blumenau in Brazil, in which nigh on a million people celebrate Brazil's Germanic heritage with events such as 'Metre Drinking', or downing a metre of beer in the shortest time (ladies' and men's events).



5.

TAKE PART IN A CONKER ALIEN MOTH SURVEY

You may have noticed that horse chestnut trees are gaining their autumn colours earlier than usual. This is because of a new parasite, the alien leaf miner moth, *Cameraria ohridella*. First described in 1984 in Macedonia, the moth has spread rapidly throughout Europe, at a rate of around 80km per year, and is now endemic in Austria, Switzerland, France, Germany, the Low Countries and the southern half of the UK.

The Cameraria ohridella's modus operandi is to lay eggs on the leaves of horse chestnut trees; when the eggs hatch, the caterpillars eat little tunnels through the leaves (thus 'leaf miner'). These make the leaves turn brown, and give the trees an autumnal appearance any time from June onwards. It is not thought that the moth endangers the long-term health of the trees

it colonises; nevertheless, researchers are interested in the way the moth is spreading, and have invited the public to help record damage.

To do this you need to go to www.conkertreescience.org.uk and register as a conker tree observer. Researchers are looking for several things: what proportion of the leaves are infected; whether birds are taking advantage of the extra meals of caterpillars; whether there is leaf-litter under the tree (which can harbour moths); and so on. Even a report of a healthy tree is useful as it gives an indication that the moth has not yet penetrated into that locale.

6.

GO TO A FARMERS' MARKET

In our great-great-grandparents' time, all food was seasonal. There was rhubarb in March, cherries in July and quinces in December. Nowadays all food is omni-available. Cherries in February? The shelves of your supermarket will groan with them at your command.

This isn't a bad thing *per se*, but there are some costs involved. One is air freight. Those cherries will have travelled a long way to get here, may have polluted the environment as they did so, and may not be very fresh.

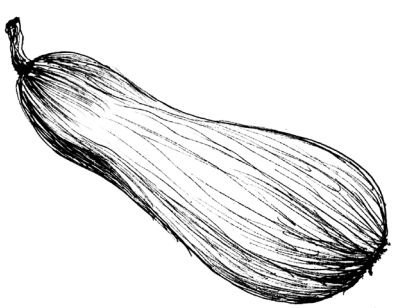
At a farmers' market, however, the concept of seasonality returns. Here you find foods that are fresh and locally grown. They have travelled only a few miles to get to you and will be tastier as a result. They may also be more nutritious: food that is stale or old can decline markedly in nutritive value.

At a farmers' market you will also find foods that are available nowhere else in the world. Cheeses of

staggering originality; breads by artisan bakers; meats cured, smoked, salted, sausaged, or otherwise crafted in traditional ways. And they may be cheaper than at supermarket prices, especially if you turn up at the end of the day when producers are unloading their remaining stock.

Autumn, naturally, is the time to go. In temperate zones, most fruits and vegetables come into season in the autumn, or at least in the period from July to October.

There are hundreds of farmers' markets to choose from, but you should probably stick with your local one. If you drive 200 miles to experience a new one, you are somewhat defeating the object.



7.

KAYAK DOWN AN AUTUMN RIVER, LOOKING AT THE CHANGING LEAVES

Leaf-viewing is one of the delights of autumn. In New England, the tourists who arrive for this purpose are called by the locals – perhaps in a spirit of mild derision – 'leaf-peepers', though the dollars they bring with them are presumably not unwelcome.

Possibly the best way of viewing autumn foliage is while floating down a river. As the paddle gently dips, the over-hanging trees glide past, an ever-changing Persian carpet of colour. The air is crisp, birds call from the forest, and there is the sweet scent of leaf mould. Perhaps a deer or a fox comes down to drink.

If you don't fancy learning to operate a kayak, and don't want an instructor tagging along, hire a rowboat or a punt for the day. Take along a picnic and a fishing rod.

If it's just the two of you, and you're on an autumnal lover's break, you can't do better than some magnificent riverine location. It could take your relationship to a whole new level.

Also, there are only two directions to argue about.



8.

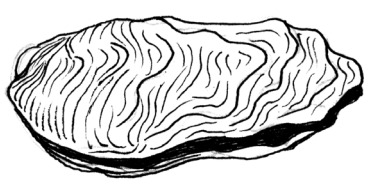
GUZZLE OYSTERS

Thanks to modern aquaculture, oysters are in season all year round, but formerly they were harvested and eaten in the autumn months. The traditional advice was to eat oysters only if there was an 'r' in the month – September, October, November, and through to April – but not in the summer, when oysters would spoil. As a result, there are still many traditional oyster festivals in autumn. Among them are the Oyster Feast in Colchester, Essex, UK, in October, or the St. Michaels Oysterfest in Maryland, USA, in November. But perhaps the biggest and best-known of the current oyster extravaganzas is the oyster festival held in Hillsborough, County Down, Northern Ireland, in September.

The Hillsborough festival offers many delights. Among these are the Titanic Gala Ball, the Miss Oyster Pearl Beauty Competition and the Parade of

Nations. But what the crowds are really here to see is the Oyster Eating World Championships. This is part of the worldwide calendar of competitive eating (chicken wings, matzo balls, baked beans, pickles, hot dogs, jalapeno peppers, pizza, onions, cow brains, reindeer sausage, chocolate bars, quail eggs, crawfish, cabbage, corned beef hash, fritters, ice cream, mashed potatoes), in which grown men and women perform live in front of screaming crowds to shovel down as much of the specified food within a given time. In the oyster slurp-off, the world record was set by Colin Shirlow in 2005 with 233 oysters in three minutes, or 1.294 oysters per second: 4lbs of living meat, all packed away inside him and writhing over each other to avoid his digestive juices.

Disgusting? Certainly. But a strangely compelling spectacle.



9.

BE A WILDLIFE VOLUNTEER

There are plenty of reasons to get involved in wildlife conservation. You might wish to gain work experience, develop a hobby, get out of the house, take exercise, meet new people, or do something useful to protect the natural environment near where you live.

Work tends to be seasonal, but autumn is a good time for volunteering. There is a lot going on, chiefly repair and maintenance work before winter sets in. Common tasks include dry stone walling, woodland coppicing (cutting trees at ground level to encourage new growth), hide repair, tree pollarding (carried out on trees such as willows to maintain tree height and provide wood), bramble clearing, repair of stock fencing, hedge laying (creating and maintaining hedges), pond digging, scrub control, ditch management and path maintenance.

You can also get involved in monitoring and

surveying wildlife, for example, counting species in a given area, though some specialist knowledge may be required.

Or there may be opportunities near you to participate in growing schemes to provide food for a local area. You might get to take home food you've helped to grow.

Preparation? A packed lunch, some Wellington boots (preferably with steel toecaps), clothing suitable for the weather (waterproofs to be on the safe side), and a recent tetanus vaccination.

