

THE GREAT OUTDOORS



Gateway to Autumn

Each season gives way to the march of time. Just as we prepare for the changes, so does nature.

By J. Morton Galetto, CU Maurice River

Welcome, September, the gateway to autumn. Throughout the Northern Hemisphere, Saturday the twenty-third marks the start of fall – the autumnal equinox. In the Southern Hemisphere it occurs in March. Our days will become shorter than our nights as the sun rises later and nightfall arrives earlier. Then, as if the world senses our need for a Christmas gift, on December 21 our days will gradually

begin to lengthen, following the winter solstice. Autumn days are some of my favorites, but the nights drag on like a weighted knapsack.

September brings back memories of clothes shopping for school clothes – stylish new shoes and maybe a trip to Landis Avenue’s better clothiers, for a wool skirt and sweater. The first weeks of school were normally hot and I longed to show off my new woolens. Each cool morning I would beg to wear one of my just-bought outfits. Upon checking the weather, my mother would do her best to dissuade me from my insistence on sporting new cold weather togs until the chill was forecast to last the entire day.

Families would load up on school supplies: notebooks, pencils, binders, ballpoint pens and the like. If our backpacks looked ratty we might shop for a new one, maybe, or a themed lunchbox. Each September seemed like a rite of passage as promotion to a new grade was proclaimed: “Wow, fourth grade!” And then in no time at all we were seniors!

For our family the start of the school year also meant going to a local orchard to buy cider and apples. When we got home my father would make a massive pot of applesauce.

This year after dismissal from school on September 6th, the first day of school for my grand-niece, nine and -nephew three-and-a-half, we went to Mood's Farm Market in Mullica Hill to pick apples. It was heartwarming to see my niece and nephew establishing traditions for their young family. Subsequently I made up my own batch of applesauce. It brought back a flood of memories.



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Apples, anyone? From late August through Mid-October it's possible to pick apples at some farms, such as Mood's Farm in Mullica Hill. Photo: K. Rossini

Mood's has a corn maze that we decided to forgo in the heat. However, we didn't pass up the cider donuts! It's never really too hot for a donut, is it?

Whether we're ready or not, each season still gives a cadence to the march of time. Just as we prepare, so does nature.

In late August hundreds of thousands of purple martins amassed on the Maurice River marshes across from the village of Mauricetown to head south. The majority were intent on spending their winter in Brazil, but many other countries in the great Amazon Basin drew their share. These staging birds were feeding on our marshes and farmland, socializing and resting before migration. Foraging fuels their journey; the area is a hub airport of sorts. When they have amassed a full complement of participants a group will depart, not to return until next spring.

The first week of September our hummingbirds were voracious, loading up on nectar for migration. By the end of the second week it seemed their numbers had begun to taper off, and by the third week they will all be en route to Central America to spend the winter.

In mid-September I observed a juvenile osprey perched on a dead river snag; he looked very much alone as most osprey had already taken nature's cue to depart for the Amazon. It's funny how the river looks so

much bigger with only one osprey versus the dozen or more that populate our skies from spring thru summer. For this species the southward journey is innate whereas for migrating geese it is taught by their adult counterparts. I often wonder which species are biologically programmed with the instinct to migrate, and which need to be schooled. It seems human young need to be taught almost everything.

Mid-September is when monarchs begin to amass on the Cape May peninsula for their bay flights to Mexico. From a geographic standpoint those of us who live in Southern New Jersey are peninsula residents. New Jersey funnels to Cape May Point where the monarch numbers will hopefully build, and people who wish to witness one of nature's great spectacles may gather there as well.

Butterflies will come through our back yard to nectar on a large patch of goldenrod. Predictably visitors will mention being allergic to the yellow blossoms, and each year I patiently explain that goldenrod is not an airborne pollen but simply blooms around the onset of real allergens like ragweed. I've not yet seen the buckeyes on the goldenrod but they will soon arrive. Shortly afterwards the New York and blue asters will be blooming, attracting a host of pollinators as well.



Monarchs cling to shrubs along the dunes at Cape May Point in preparation to cross the Delaware Bay. Photo: J. Morton Galetto.



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(Upper) A monarch nectars on goldenrod.

(Lower) A garden spider affixes her web to blue aster in the September garden. Photos: J. Morton Galetto

On chilly mornings the warmer river waters will be wreathed with wisps of fog arising from the surface, framed by the red foliage of black gum trees bordering the banks. Soon the sassafras and red maple will follow suit in yellows, oranges, reds, and purples – nature's stage.

Groundsel tree is blooming on the Delaware Bayshore, offering nectar to bees and small butterflies. The insects it attracts in turn will feed foraging birds. Groundsel is hardy even in the face of salt spray and nutrient-poor sandy soils, making it plentiful along the brackish waterways. Once in Delmont I saw hundreds of buckeye butterflies nectaring and holding on to one large bush of groundsel while awaiting suitable winds to migrate across the bay.



Groundsel goes to seed in October. It offers cover for birds and insects in winds along the Delaware Bayshore. Photo: J. Morton Galetto.

If winds, ocean swell, and hurricanes hold off, September is a great time for sports fishermen. The estuaries that serve as nurseries for bait fish are releasing their bounty, as juveniles repopulate the ocean e.g. peanut bunker, mullet, spot. Surf and coastal fishermen are catching blues, stripers, croakers, kingfish, false albacore, tautog, sheepshead, kingfish, and even some flounder. And the offshore gulfstream fishermen are hooking the highly migratory game fish like mahi, cod, tile, dolphin, and fluke. Global warming is pushing some of our traditional fisheries like black seabass north to New England waters, and we are catching

some more traditionally southern fish including white shrimp. Things are changing.

In the mornings mixed flocks of blackbirds will pass overhead in endless lines after roosting in trees for the night. One of the highlights of the fall is driving local farm field roads in western Cumberland County to watch masses of blackbirds murmuring over the farm fields. Their synchronized aerial acrobatics are mesmerizing.

Bountiful and beautiful September will soon be followed by October and the forest mast crop. Truly a great outdoor stage—and you won't want to miss the show.