

LYONSHALL COUNTRY DIARY

Issue 22: October 2018



A view from 'Penrhos House' looking North West towards Wales: Thanks to the Keeler family.

October! And we can no longer be “in denial” that winter is on its way. So I’m going to start this issue of the Diary with a heart-felt plea from one of our contributors which I fully endorse – ***“Please do not be too tidy in your gardens; leave some piles of clippings/leaves etc. for the Hedgehogs.”*** Well, in my case that is certainly not a problem – I can’t begin to tidy my beloved wilderness and I could probably spare anyone a ton of leaves and not even notice they had gone! (If anyone wants to take me up on this offer, “buyer collects”...) Sadly, I haven’t seen a Hedgehog in the garden for two or three years now but I live in hope and meanwhile our piles of leaves and our eco-piles of fallen wood provide homes for all sorts of mice and voles, bugs and birds, to which they are very welcome. (The Wrens have been especially busy around our wood-piles recently).

This plea echoes in some respects a piece I “caught” on the early-morning farming programme on the radio a few days ago. (I don’t have the details – I was only half awake at that early hour!) A farmer – not local – was stating that to conserve our wildlife and minimise its decline we cannot rely on ‘Nature Reserves’ alone but we must do what we can in our immediate neighbourhoods. It seems like common sense when you think about it! So whether your garden is a wildlife haven by accident or design, you’re “doing the right thing”!

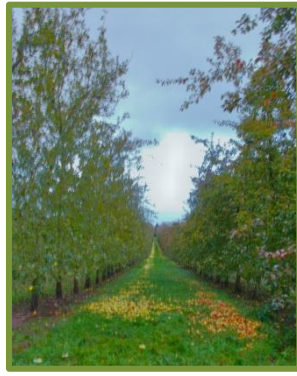
The month in general

There are some very disturbing quotations about October – “*the month of tension*”, “*ghosts*” “*ambiguity*” – which are mostly sad or inappropriate for a Country Diary, so I thought I would use the one quote which makes *ME* laugh, even if it’s only marginally relevant! In memory of the much-loved Denis Norden, {thinker, comedian, broadcaster, author and a very witty raconteur}, who died in September this year, here is his comment on the month:

“It’s a funny kind of month, October. For the really keen cricket fan it’s when you discover that your wife left you in May”.

(Denis Mostyn Norden 1922 – 2018, “*She*” magazine, October 1977)

A “funny kind of month” indeed! Here in Lyonshall we have ‘late-blooming’ flowers from the summer and ‘early-blooming’ flowers anticipating next spring. The apples in the cider orchards have fallen and are now awaiting the autumn harvest...



Apples ready for harvest.

...but the apples on our own little fruit trees ripened in September and if they were not gathered by the start of this month, it is too late for harvesting until next year. On a sunny but chilly day in mid-month I was assured by a total stranger in Kington that the weather portends "*a bad winter which will be followed by a bad summer because that's the way it always goes*" – don't you just love cheerful people? Maybe we will happen to be in the same butcher's shop at the same time in October next year so that I can congratulate her if she was right! Meanwhile I've been looking out for any "definite signs" in the local flora and fauna and seen nothing to convince myself either way.

In fact, as in September, there has been a dearth of sightings, which may be due to the weather, loss of habitat or simply the lack of anyone in the right place at the right time. I shall remain alert to see whether Lyonshall is conforming to national trends or whether there might – just **might** – be a local explanation. (The decline in the hedgehog population is certainly widespread so providing for them as mentioned above is especially important.)

Fauna

Mammals

Do you want the good news or the bad news? In September I said that I thought I had **heard** Polecats near the village but I could not be sure; in October a Polecat **was seen** in the village but it had been killed on the road. Hopefully then there are others around. They are cute looking but not 'finger-friendly' should you get near enough to one to think of picking it up! They have been increasing in number and making their way eastwards from Wales for a few years now but they are still elusive. (I notice that a litter of Polecats are on the front cover of the BBC "Countryfile" Calendar for 2019 but I don't know where that photograph was taken).



A "Welsh" Polecat.

As usual, squirrels, rabbits and rats formed the bulk of Lyonshall's observed wild mammal-stock. There is nothing much to say about them other than my sneaking admiration for the way the Grey Squirrels eat the apples in our garden, by balancing them on top of a gate and then gnawing at them carefully and delicately until the fruit falls off, usually about half-way through. Then they go and get another one! My garden is full of half-eaten apples, not one of them touched by human hands...

But no Deer, no Badgers, no Hares, no Field Voles, even though my 'Irish Terrier' digs for them enthusiastically, and the brown animal seen in the distance a week or two ago might have been a Fox but it was too far away to say for sure.

Birds

There have been better results with birds.

FEEDING – I am delighted to show here three photos, taken on Penrhos hill to the west of our Parish on mobile phone cameras on two different days and proving that one doesn't need expensive camera equipment to get good shots. One of them, taken on a very misty morning, shows a young Kestrel, obviously conscious of the photographer but still keeping one eye on a paralysed Blackbird which could be its next meal! One other shows a Nuthatch, hovering like a Hummingbird in front of a garden bird-feeder. Nuthatches are astonishingly agile little birds – head upwards, like most small birds and like the Great Spotted Woodpecker shown in the third photo; head downwards in the '*possibly-unique*' Nuthatch position; and here seen hovering. It seems that if peanuts are available there's nothing the Nuthatch can't do! [Taken this month in one garden] – We are so lucky!



Woodpecker.



KESTREL & "**Lunch**"!



Nuthatch. © Les & Val K.

FLYING ? – No photos taken – which is just as well in the circumstances – but we have an interesting report of a female Sparrowhawk which flew up a road in front of a car for about 100 yards at "a consistent **35 mph**"! It obviously wasn't in a built-up area! And talking of flying, I was pleased to hear, and then see, two Swans flying over the 'Upper Fishpool' Orchard at dusk a few evenings ago. Are these the same two Swans I've heard on-and-off for eight or nine years? It's impossible to tell but I would like to think so. However even when the 'Upper Fishpool' had open water they never landed there – just one Swan was seen on the pool – just once and I doubt whether anyone even recorded what type of Swan it was.

FIGHTING !– Wrens! In addition to the usual and plentiful Sparrows, Dunnocks, Chaffinches and Robins we seem to have a lot of Wrens this year. They are a delight to watch as they poke round the tree trunks and each Wren seems to have its own preferred bit of the garden – but they fight quite vigorously when they meet. Somehow one doesn't expect such aggression from such tiny birds.



Pheasants in 'Church House Meadow'.

Pheasants – the Pheasants are back! Right on cue, just after the sound of “the shoot” finished, the Pheasants appeared – I counted 3 males and 11 females in the meadow one Saturday evening; the following day being a “no–shooting” Sunday they had been joined by another 4 males. While all the Cock–pheasants ‘*strutted their stuff*’ up and down the meadow, in and out of the hedgerows and along the trackbed, the Hen pheasants were a little shyer but far from timid. Every year I am surprised by the variety of plumage the Cock–Pheasants carry. They are wonderfully colourful but if you see them up close they are not all alike and can be easily identified one from another – three or four years ago “*Shadrach*”, “*Meshach*” and “*Abednego*” hung around on our Platform all winter, with “*Shadrach*” by far the most handsome and “*Abednego*” downright scruffy, although I’m sure they were all from the same batch of eggs! I certainly don’t object to shooting for meat (or the shooting of vermin) and I eat game but if we have hangers–on among the Pheasants this year they are safe here and welcome (even though their awful squawking disturbs our hens and the dog)!

Finally – Pigeons! We always seem to have a number of Wood Pigeons flapping around, and October was no different, but I was surprised to find two fresh new Pigeon’s eggs below trees on our old railway trackbed as late as October 10th. These were broken and empty but obviously not the work of predators so there must have been hatchlings above. I wonder if they will survive until next Spring or whether they are just food for our resident Tawny Owls!

Insects and Invertebrates

October is close to the end of the Butterfly season. On sunny days earlier in the month, there was the odd Peacock, Tortoiseshell and Comma around, the occasional “White”, but I doubt whether we will see any more now until next Spring.

We probably won’t see many more Hoverflies or Wasps, either, but the ivy flowers were alive with them during the sunny spells. The pictures below show Common (female worker) Wasps on the ivy in mid–month, stocking up for the winter. There were swarms of them and they are harmless enough if left alone. “Workers” can be distinguished by the number of their black triangular bands (as shown here); “Queen” wasps only have one triangular band and are twice as big.



Common Wasp workers harvesting the Autumn Ivy crop.

There is nothing much to report otherwise from Lyonshall’s insect and invertebrate population – a few small brown moths and shiny flies, spiders in varying sizes but not so many of them now, and earthworms under garden pots and stones. Please let me know if you see anything out of the ordinary.

Fish, reptiles and amphibians

Once again there have been no reports of reptiles or amphibians but I am pleased to say we have some “fishy” news.

Readers of the *Hereford Times* may have read the report of Eels being released into the River Arrow on the edge of our parish near Moorcourt. Eels have become critically endangered and this project is part of a wider initiative by the Herefordshire Eel Group and others, following discussions with the Environment Agency and Natural England. The group is working hard to help the Eel by improving habitat and water quality as well as building “eel

passes” and it is hoped that many of these small eels will stay in Herefordshire for up to 20 years before returning to the Sargasso Sea as mature fish.

Also in the Arrow, Brown Trout are starting to spawn but no Salmon have yet been seen.

Flora

Trees, Shrubs and Smaller Plants

In last month's issue of the Lyonshall Country Diary we tried to do justice to the autumn colours. In October these were just a little less spectacular as the leaves began to fall from the trees and smaller plants died back and the next gale or heavy rainstorm may see the end of Autumn as we like to think of it. Just a couple of photos, therefore, of late-flowering wild plants – Hogweed ['Cow Parsnip'] and Mallow -- there seems to be far less of both this year than in previous years but it's much too soon to draw any conclusions or worry about this. The 'Lavatera *olbia*' shrub in my garden, a close cousin of the wild Mallow '*Lavatera rosea*', after a rocky start in the miserable early Spring has been as good as ever!



Hogweed



& Wild Mallow.

Fungi, Moss and Lichens

The fungi have been **better** than ever. “For the record” we show below another photo of the dreaded Honey Fungus (see September issue) and one of the delicious Field Mushrooms, both taken early in the month. But the spectacular “new” fungi not noted before in Lyonshall are the Fly Agaric (*Amanita muscaria*) and the Common Cavalier (*Melanoleuca polioleuca*). Fly Agaric is very distinctive in its shape and colour. We have below two photos taken at Penrhos House on the same day. The red ball shape with white “spots” is the young fungus; the flatter, shinier “mushroom” is a little older and has fewer “spots” because these are often washed off by rain.



Fly Agaric (young) -> Mature & 'washed out'. © Val K.

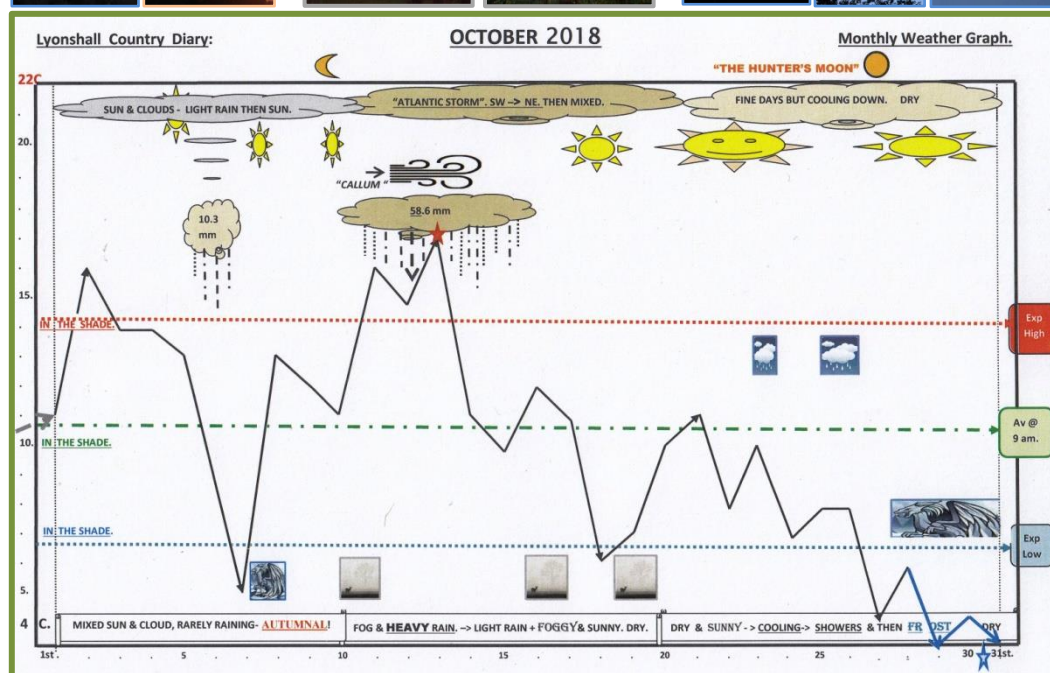
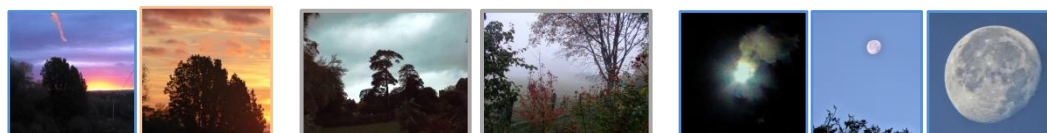
This fungus has a particularly interesting history. **DO NOT EAT IT**. It has been used as a hallucinogen in sacred rituals; it is psychoactive and has been used as a medicine; and it has been used as an insecticide. It is also the toadstool given to Alice in Wonderland and was considered by the Victorians to be a symbol of good luck. BE CAREFUL WHAT YOU WISH FOR! Although **death from eating Fly Agaric** is extremely rare, its effects can be very nasty. Nice to look at, though... (allegedly fairies and elves live in them as any 'Noddy' reader knows)! ☺ By comparison the Common Cavalier is very dull! It is similar to a 'Wood Mushroom' but with much whiter gills and a darker top which only becomes a lighter colour in very dry weather such as we have had this Summer and Autumn. We are once again indebted to John Harris

john@mushroomdiary.co.uk for help in identifying it because, although not uncommon, it is difficult to distinguish from other mushrooms. This one is **edible** but **"nothing special"**.



Common Cavalier. Edible: 'Field Mushrooms' & The Common Puffball. 'Honey Fungus' .
 Other fungi recorded in previous issues such as the "golf-ball like" Common Puffball [delicious when young and firm] have popped up again. There are no other new sightings.

Lyonshall Weather in October



October started well with dry autumnal weather but we soon caught the tail end of "Storm Callum" which brought the most rain in a few days that we had received since the last September 20th - 22nd Storms. The 'First Frost' came, as expected, on the 7th of October to be followed by harder frosts at the end of the month when the sunny days brought colder clear nights and views of a wonderful 'Hunter's Moon'. The graph above says it all, I think.

Lyonshall, Nature and the Future

As we all know, there is a lot going on now at international, Government, Departmental and Local Authority level. With so much in the pipeline, it is impossible to speculate how our little parish of Lyonshall might be affected. So for the time being I shall concentrate on what I can see, hear, touch or smell around the neighbourhood and I hope that many of this Country Diary's readers will do the same. Please let me have lots and lots of contributions for November, however unspectacular or unimportant you think they may be. "Every little helps" and Lyonshall's part in understanding our natural history is just as valid as London's!



ALL CONTRIBUTIONS (verbal or photographic, amateur or expert) GRATEFULLY RECEIVED
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