

## BRIAN'S NATURE DIARY FOR OCTOBER

It's conker time again. Even more important to me it's the time to scuff through the carpet of leaves piled deep by autumn winds, recapturing childhood delight. Shame on me!

The tree sheds its leaves for several reasons. One is to get rid of some of the waste products of the growing season, which have been stored in the leaves. The green chlorophyll is too precious to let go, so the tree withdraws it, leaving behind the tired leaves. Ironically it is these waste products that give rise to the glowing autumn colours. As they are shed they leave behind a scar and just above it will be the already-formed bud of next year's leaf. So for naturalists like me the first sign of spring is clear even before autumn has got under way. Incidentally these leaf-scars are different for every major tree, and are a good way of telling them apart in winter. In fact the leaf-scars and the bark together make it easy to identify trees at this time.

Horse chestnut, field maple, beech and rowan are prominent among many trees spectacular in their autumn colour, with a range of tints through lemon yellow to oranges and reds; from burnished copper to deepest rich brown. As colourful as any is the bramble which gives up its leaves in a blaze of scarlet. Think of a scene, at the woodland edge, as the last wraiths of morning mist are sent packing by a ray of sunshine, lighting up the trees to put on a show, it seems just for you, as colourful and nebulous as an artist's paintbox.

Just a decade or so ago the barn owl was an endangered species. At one time I used to see its ghostly white form along many a country lane as I traveled in the evening to and from my teaching engagements. Shortage of nest-sites – it likes barns and ruined buildings as well as hollow trees – and weed-free tidy fields yielding fewer mice, voles, and shrews for it to eat, seem to have been among the reasons for its rarity. The placing of suitable nestboxes along with the wide weedy headlands now being left around our fields do seem to be aiding its recovery. There is an occupied nestbox on the farm only a few hundred yards from the badger sett close to where we live. Even now though its spine chilling shriek is too rare a sound, and I am sure you would agree that we would be the poorer if we lose this stunningly beautiful creature.

I hope that you, like us, keep a well-stocked bird table. As the leaves fall from the trees our garden birds become more visible, but also more vulnerable to sharp-eyed predators. It goes without saying that as food supplies in the wild become scarcer, garden feeding becomes more important. In these days of more and longer holidays it is all too easy to forget the birds when you go off for your winter break. Sudden absences, especially during severe weather could lead to the unthinkable, garden birds starving to death. So remember to arrange for someone to keep your garden feeders topped up while you are away.