

BRIAN'S NATURE DIARY FOR SEPTEMBER

I'll start this month with a bit of a grouse. Yes I know that was in August, but it's not that kind of grouse. It's about the wild fruit ripening season. Because of the kind of year we have had weatherwise, all the hedgerow fruits are ripening at the same time. Already we have missed out on the delectable mulberries, which we get from a tree in a local park, a leftover of the days when they were planted by the gentry for their own use.

Now the wild plums, the blackberries, and the elderberries are all ripening at the same time, and it looks as if the wild apples, the haws (hawthorn berries), and the sloes (blackthorn berries) will be ready to pick before we can turn around. You see Jane, Dave and I take advantage of this wild bounty to produce jams, pickles, chutneys, pies, and best of all wines for our own use. A free harvest provided just for the gathering. You should taste Dave's wild plum relish, believe me it is unbeatable!

Among the many animals to take advantage of the wild harvest is the hedgehog, which will feed greedily on all manner of fruits, along with small creatures like earthworms, snails, slugs, and beetles. At this time of year they are laying down a special kind of brown fat, in addition to the normal white fat. It is this store which will keep them ticking over during the long winter sleep, and it is crucial to their survival. This is the reason why those late-born young hedgehogs fail to survive. And this leads me to the tale of such a youngster, who was lucky enough to be found by Dave in his garden. But for his intervention this little chap would have died. Faced with the choice of leaving it to its fate or taking it into care, he knew it was a choice of no choice, so to speak.

He was named Victor, not after a certain TV character who had an unfortunate encounter with a hedgehog while he had One Foot in the Grave, but after a work colleague who had a prickly disposition. Victor lived in the garage, in a warm and spacious rabbit hutch. He grew quite rapidly on a diet of tinned cat and dog food. Apparently there is no truth in the rumour that Victor would hand Dave his spanners when he was working on the Harley-Davidson that shared the same garage!

Experts recommend that a rescue hedgehog should weight at least 350 grams before release. This is because they tend to starve for some time before they learn where to find food. When Victor was returned to the wild the following spring he weighed a massive 750 grams and could barely waddle. His release turned into something of a family occasion, with about ten of us watching him make his way into the undergrowth.

In the breeding season the dabchick or little grebe may be found on quiet weedy stretches of slow-flowing rivers, or small ponds, where it breeds. About now they disperse to spend winter on larger lakes, gravel pits, and reservoirs. They feed by diving and swimming under water where they catch small fish and other animals. In severe weather many will die, their food supply locked away by ice. Others may travel towards the coast in search of open water.

Autumn is the time for fungi. Contrary to popular belief only a few of them are poisonous, but without some knowledge it is hard to tell the good-to-eat from the possibly lethal. Even unlikely subjects like the inkcap, the bluelegs, the beefsteak fungus, and the weird ear fungus are all edible.

In September the fields are full of pigeons feeding on spilled corn and weed seeds. They cram their crops full to bursting point. Commonest of all is the woodpigeon, now officially Britain's commonest bird. Identify it by its white collar, and a white patch in the wing. Near towns and increasingly around our villages you are likely to find the feral pigeon; They vary but many of them will have a white patch on the back above the tail. The smaller and slimmer pale brown collared dove may also be present. Finally the stock dove, with air-force blue patches on the wings, and no white, may complete this quartet.

Queen of the Forest is the silver birch. Beautiful, graceful, and easy to recognize by its pendulous branches and silvery trunk, its delicate greenery changes to lemon-yellow before leaf-fall which takes place at the end of this month. Silver birch is a short-lived tree, not usually surviving more than a century or so.