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Autumn: A Season of Change

Peter J. Marchand
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Tiny ladybugs, or ladybeetles, fly one hundred miles in their autumn migration. Millions of Monarch butterflies leave northeastern North America for the volcanic mountains west of Mexico City.

These are two of the more interesting and amazing facts minutely scrutinized by Marchand as he examines the season of autumn. That smell in the air. That feeling of overnight change when one rises in the morning. Is it something in the wind? Is it internal?

Humans are not the only creatures that experience the instinctual pull of autumn. Not only do animals know and begin to prepare, but plants as well. “The entire process of senescence in plants - the aging, the dying back of nonperennial parts, the color change, and the final discarding of stems and leaves - is highly ordered, involving much more than a passive loss of normal function in the plant.”

How does a frog or a turtle survive subfreezing temperatures? The frog shows no advance preparation and turtle eggs hatch in the fall, but the infants freeze there until spring, an ability they possess only in their first year.

There is not a facet of migratory behavior in birds that fails to elicit wonder. The blackpoll warbler, at half an ounce in weight, flies 2,500 miles one way, much of it nonstop over the Atlantic between the coasts of New England and Venezuela, to winter in Brazil. The small, secretive, solitary vole remains active year-round by “huddling” in the winter. It loses weight, instead of gaining, and stores large amounts of food.

The truth, stranger and more fascinating than fiction, is accompanied by the author’s photographs from the season. The text is interspersed with verses and quotations from a wide selection of poets and writers.

Founder of the winter ecology program at Vermont’s Center for Northern Studies and author of Life in the Cold, Marchand is Director of Southwestern Field Studies in Florence, Arizona.
KATRINA YURENKA (May / June 2000)

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