Autumn of the Uplands

WORDS & PHOTOS
by Jane A. Mares

No sweeter place to be than the high moor in early September, sleepy with bees working the late-flowering ling, the hives humming at noon in their sheltered hollow, the air enlivened with soft gusts coming like periodic waves over a warm sea. It is freighted, that breeze, with herbal fragrance from the miles of wild grasses, heather, fernbrake and furze across which it has travelled. The lungs draw deep draughts, as if they drank the elixir of immortality. The gaze climbs the near slope, idles from one long, flowing hill-line to the next, drifts to the sky's distant edge, swings in a circle and is everywhere gladdened by beauty. Sounds are infrequent, tiny, remote, yet against the land's deep hush are easily detected: the far-away whicker of a pony, the down-sliding cry of a circling buzzard, the trilling of a grasshopper. Free from the din, commotion and toxic fumes that often bedevil modern life, the senses expand joyfully. The heart, too, fills with optimism. Here is the real world. In the clean, aromatic air and profound peace of the uplands, hearing grows keen, sight gains clarity, and the mind has space and time to consider the ancient mysteries and new enigmas surrounding the 'how' and 'why' of life.

The bells of *Erica cinerea*, earliest into bloom, are first to wither, individual sprigs, then broad swathes succumbing to the brown rust of autumn. In August look and look again, for it is then that the heathergrounds reach their multi-hued prime, purple and lilac, mauve, violet and, at certain hours, rinsed with the radiance of dawn, lit by the last golden beams from the west – dyed in dazzling tints beyond the description of any colour chart. When the glory fades from the heather, so summer passes from the uplands.

Noon on a humid, thunder-brewing day not far off the equinox. As with the rest of the world, the moor has its fair face, and its opposite. A cloud-shadow dims the hill. Forbidding against the bright sky, it is suddenly, manifestly, one of the 'black hills' upon the map of Exmoor, where heather holds sway and for three out of four seasons shows a countenance dark as the impoverished peat in which it roots. On the crest, a pony herd stands for a while in silhouette, the stallion a little apart, head into the wind. But even at that height where the air rarely falls still, on this sultry day the breeze is too weak to deter the flies that cluster at eye-corners and visit nostrils. The mares twitch, stamp, whisk their long tails. The stallion stands stoically aloof. It is the youngsters that are most afflicted. One filly in particular wastes energy lashing out at the glint of wings under her belly, rolls in the dust, canters out from the herd and back; presses up close to an older pal; even goes once or twice to the stallion, the herd defender, and he is patient with her but can offer no relief. It is the lead mare, the decision-maker, who eventually takes them off the ridge, the herd quick to follow her, hooves drumming on the downhill track to the water. At the rear, the stallion in tetchy mood lunges at a sheep coming uphill towards him. But she has been keeping an eye out and is already bustling hastily off the path, an old ewe, full of years, well aware Exmoors can be bossy and never more so than in bot-fly weather.

A dipper whirrs away downstream as the herd splashes across the ford without pausing to drink. Their wild pace only slows when the mare turns up a side combe, its slopes dense with bracken. Gradually the sweating ponies settle, browsing the tops, up to their withers in the shady thicket. When they dip their heads the fronds act as fly-whisks, and the pungency of the bruised plants partly masks their scent. The young filly lies down, hidden among the stripy green pillars and sleeps, twitching occasionally, until a freshening breeze sweeps her dreams away.

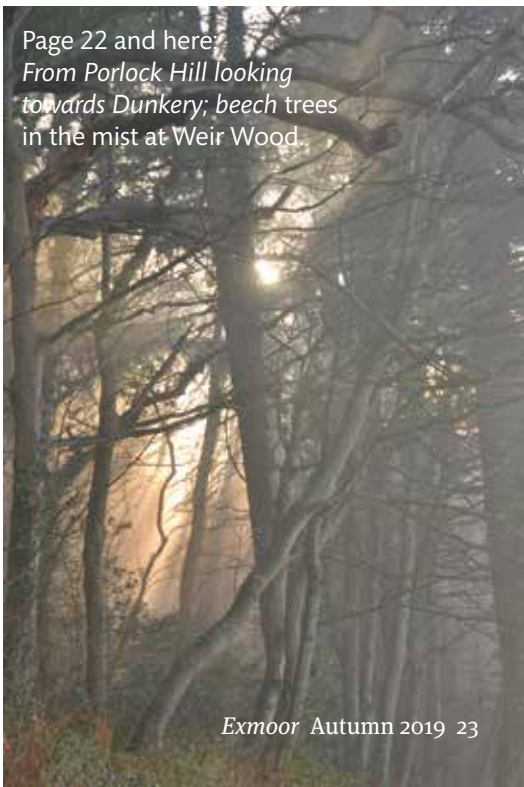
A norwester roisters through the October wood, unseating leaves in scores, hundreds, trillions. They swoop from the oak, twinkle from the birch, sail, twirl, spin, a blizzard of leaves unmatched until the first snowfall – the descent of which can no longer be assured. The deepening layers add spice to the earthy aromas of autumn, a fertile decay nourishing soil bacteria and fostering a proliferation of fungus-flora, from tiny moulds to giant puffballs. Diverse and mysterious, the fungi have given us dry rot in roof beams and yeast in bread, potato blight and penicillin, death cap and truffle. A reminder that there are different ways to view the world and worlds invisible to the human eye, that many things lie latent, below the surface, that the last day of October, toadstool month, is Halloween, anciently celebrated as the

Storm brewing.

Exmoor ponies at Hawkcombe Head.

Above and here: *the last of the bell heather; a* ***Cladonia*** *lichen on Croydon Hill; a Highland cow having a good scratch above Hanny Combe.*

Page 22 and here: *From Porlock Hill looking towards Dunkery; beech* trees in the mist at Weir Wood.



From top: *Autumn approaches – stag at the end of summer on Almsworthy Common; glowing autumn beech trees; red admiral visiting ivy flowers; late foal and mare on Countisbury Common; evening mist viewed whilst driving down off the hill at Tivington.*

Page 25, clockwise from top left: *Glowing leaves at Luccombe Plantation; view of Dunkery in a bleak mood; ice crystals on a blade of grass – the first frost; hair balled on a fence near Chetsford Water; crow on Porlock Hill; Halloween moon; Withiel Florey flock during the raddle.*

eve of Samhain when the crossing places between the realms of life and death were considered uncommonly accessible.

Midnight in the depth of the wood. A thin wind with a faraway note stirs the treetops and passes on. Mist filters down through the branches, thickens in the lower storey, hiding fern and bramble. A groan, dredged from some source of deep torment, racks the silence. The wood holds its breath. Again, closer, a sound to freeze the blood, half-anguished, half-enraged. So might one of the old gods, straying from the past, speech forgotten, give release to his emotions. Among black branches suddenly a great antlered head, the glint of a menacing eye. It is surely Cernunnos, the horned one, the man-stag whose image was painted on cave walls over 20,000 years ago. Another roar shakes the air and fades into eerie, coughing grunts. There is a scent of damp fur and musk, and a shadow, moving at an unhurried, ritualistic pace, merges into mist and darkness.

A soft glow, spreading and brightening behind Luccombe Hill. Crow makes his voice heard, dark as the pre-dawn pines. A few last stars, lost and small, dissolve like frost-melt. In the increasing light, robin meditates, redefining the travelling song of East Water, thready with distance. The sun's rays find a stag on the hillbrow, enrich his coat, outline the antlers on his raised head – a kingly stag, a 12-pointer.

He tilts back his great armoury and roars a challenge, muzzle to the sky, breath puffing on the icy air. A group of hinds with calves come over the brow. Two calves stand up and lightly bat with forehooves like boxing hares. One hind races downhill and others join her in a fit of high jinks, calves gamely leaping at their heels. The dark-maned, heavy-pelted king makes his own descent at a stately walk and the herd moves aside, scattering along the hillflank. Two mature stags cross the skyline. The rearmost, sandy-coloured stag catches up with the first at a fast trot and they lock heads and jockey, a step forward, a step back, until the weaker gives way and runs a few yards downhill with the other in bellicose pursuit. They vie again, the clap and clash audible as antler knocks and rattles against antler, heads tussling, angling this way and that. Both disengage abruptly to stare below. The 12-pointer is pacing with slow deliberation up the slope.

He pauses, comes on again. The sandy-coated stag steps threateningly forward, lifts then lowers his head, clicks points. The king is in the lower, adverse position but he stands rock-steady, back straight as a tabletop. His opponent strives to shift him with every muscle and sinew, front legs showing the strain, beginning to weaken, and the master takes a step up, turning the other so he is side-on to the hill and they stand now level, but not equal. The light-coated stag contends for all he is worth but is tossed aside, slips downhill, finished.

The hinds have not once looked up. The second stag stares outward, jaws working, browsing the heather-tops. The 12-pointer shows no interest in food but follows a trail to the soiling-pit, a rush-screened depression of peaty-mire where hinds, calves and prickets have gathered in a jostling crowd. They immerse themselves, come out shaking their coats, make way for others with no obvious order of precedence. But at the stag's approach all drift away. Only his antlers show, swaying from side to side as he wallows. When he emerges, plastered up to the neck, he seems to have doubled in bulk and his coat glistens in the sun, black as pitch. He threshes the bracken, paws the ground like a bull, but none will face him. Or is that an answer, rising from the bowels of the next valley? A belving so faint it might be carried on a wind from the past, when the first herds crossed from Europe 400,000 years ago, their slots printing land that now lies sea-drowned, fathoms deep.

The moon of the rutting stags wanes; the season's clinging mist is dispersed, the last leaf brought down by blustering winds and lancing rain. The waters of November run loud and jubilant. Summers were ever brief on the moor. But now the wait for snow, inaugurator of true winter, grows longer. Autumn has extended its reach, a middle ground, between the last butterfly and the first ice crystal. The pattern of the seasons from fluid has turned erratic, but the key to survival, down eons of time, has always been adaptability to change. Plus, perhaps, small needs and an indomitable spirit.

At month's end, a yark wind, starkly cold, the sky bleak, the land reflecting the weather's mood of austerity. Between the spikes of a whitethorn and the dense spines of a furzebush a flight of five or six little grey birds circles and interweaves. A family? A meeting of neighbours? A hurried, scratchy, ratchety song catches on the air. It might have belonged to a dunnock had it been higher, clearer, briefer. But it goes on for long minutes without change or check. One bird flits out of the furze and drops lower, to perch on the heather. Yellow legs, a tail with the cocky angle of a wren, but longer, *Sylvia undata*, Dartford warbler or 'Darty', year-round resident on the moor.

Weighing little more than nothing, its resilience is daily tested, yet it has held on against all odds, making a home among prickles, a living by hunting spiders, insects. It takes time to finish its song before flicking after its friends, jauntily, purposefully heading away (who knows where?) through the dimming light and worsening weather of December's eve.