

# Autumn Favourites

WORDS by Julian Gurney



This image by David J. Rowlatt. Images right by Neville Stanikk (top), Debbie Woollacott (centre) and Julian Gurney (bottom).



### 3. The Heddon Valley

I am unashamedly totally besotted with this idyllic valley. It runs north to south so is sheltered from the prevailing winds, and its mixture of ash and oak woodland interspersed with sycamore and the occasional spindle make it a glorious place for an autumn stroll.



### 2. Woody Bay

Oak woodland sweeping down impossibly steep slopes to almost touch the sea is one of the sights I remember most vividly from my youthful trip to swim in the quiet waters of Woody Bay. To see it at its best, walk from the Heddon Valley in the afternoon, when the sun pierces the leaves of the woodland canopy and lights the ground flora on the woodland floor.



### 1. Ash Bridge on the East Lyn River above Watersmeet

The river at Ash Bridge is a border between two different woodland habitats; the colours of the different trees complement each other. Add the short stretch of relatively calm water for light reflection and you have a perfect autumnal palette. On one bank, the golden beech and yellow larch planted just after the last war, on the other, the rich browns and coppers of the abandoned oak coppice. Around lunchtime is the best time to see it as the sun reaches its highest point and breaks through the different leaf types to dance on the rippling East Lyn.

More from me next time, all the very best.  
Julian

**READ MORE**  
[www.facebook.com/ExmoorNatureDiary](https://www.facebook.com/ExmoorNatureDiary)  
[www.twitter.com/ExmoorNature](https://www.twitter.com/ExmoorNature)

Welcome to my first article for the *Exmoor Magazine*. I am delighted to join the team. I shall start with a short introduction to who I am and why you may, hopefully, find what I write interesting.

A few years after leaving Pilton school in Barnstaple, I found myself on one of those schemes that Margaret Thatcher's Government had set up to try to reduce the number of people claiming unemployment benefit. 'Welfare to Work' I believe it was known as, run by the 'Manpower Services Commission'.

A small group of about six of us were loaded into a minibus and deposited in the National Trust woodlands in the Heddon Valley, armed, rather alarmingly, with new boots, donkey jackets, chainsaws and a vague plan of what we needed to do. It was from here that my luke-warm interest in nature was about to be elevated to a whole new level.

Our supervisor was a Welshman called Taffy Morgan, I kid you not. On the very first day he came into the workshop, laid some leaves on the bench and said, "Right, who knows what trees these are from?" I waited with baited breath, suffering one of those awkward and emotionally painful teenage dilemmas: do I reel off the names of the trees, or do I shuffle

about, staring at the floor with my hands deep in my pockets, in the typical teenage stance my new colleagues had already adopted?

I swallowed hard, and went for it: "Ash, oak, sycamore, beech, holly and... hazel, I think?" Total silence and some hard stares followed.

Now, that outburst had two consequences. The first was rather beneficial as I immediately took an unofficial role, in Taffy's eyes anyway, as someone who could at least be trusted to cut down the right type of tree. The second outcome was less enjoyable: I had somewhat alienated myself as a bit of a know-it-all with the rest of the team, which made the next six months uncomfortable at times.

However, that first day proved to be an epiphanic moment for me. It was the beginning of a career I look back on now with pride and much fondness. I will talk more about the intervening years in my nature diary in later issues; suffice to say for now that I ended my career as Head Ranger for the National Trust's Watersmeet and Heddon Valley properties by the time that I took early retirement in February 2016. The job of Head Ranger had become more and more administrative; I needed less responsibility and more time for nature.

I now work part time in the Exmoor National Park Centre in Lynmouth, as an 'Information Adviser', sharing my passion for Exmoor with locals and visitors. I also share a lot of my observations on social media via a Facebook page and Twitter account I've named Exmoor Nature Diary.

Most importantly, I now have the time to enjoy the Exmoor I spent so much of my career looking after. I live with my wife Lynne, a native of the Heddon Valley, in a remote cottage overlooking the Severn Sea at Countisbury; I shall tell you more about that too as time goes by. For now though, seeing as autumn is almost upon us, I want to write about autumnal colour and my favourite places to go and enjoy it.

I'm not going to start with a lecture on photosynthesis, chlorophyll and leaf abscission; I'll presume for now that, like me, you are more interested in the picturesque quality of an Exmoor autumn?

I will, though, have to touch on what makes one autumn better than another. It's all down to a weather balancing act. What you need is cool days and nights with very little rain, light winds and no frosts. That way the science, which we are not going to talk about, has the

time to work its full magic without the leaves being blown down prematurely, knocked down by heavy rain or the whole process being accelerated by freezing. Luckily for us, last year's autumn had all those things in just the right measure. Of all the years I worked in Exmoor woodlands, 2016 was the best I can remember for colour.

Where are the best places to see autumn colour on Exmoor? I'm now going to let you into a little secret, a well-kept personal secret that, now I'm retired, hopefully can't come back and bite me. Over the course of a year, every year, the lovely people at the National Trust Press Office would come to us rangers with requests for stories – things like 'Where's your favourite place for a picnic?', 'Where's the best place to walk a dog?' and – one that came up every year without fail – 'Where's the best place to see autumnal colour?' Here's my shameful secret... I never told them. I used to tell them the second best. I don't know why, perhaps it was because some of the things I enjoyed most about Exmoor I wanted to keep private. But I'm retired now, I have more time to visit these wonderful places and it's time, at long last, to share my real favourites... Honestly!

So, here they are: my top three places to see autumnal colour.

Long-standing readers may recall that we published a profile article about Julian Gurney back in the summer of 2013 when he was Head Ranger at Watersmeet and the Heddon Valley. Since then, Julian has retired, and earlier this year he agreed to join our ranks of writers with a regular nature diary. We are very excited to have him on board and already have a long list of ideas about his future diaries in issues to come. Here is his first contribution...