

November 2011

In Welsh, Tachwed, the month of slaughtering or Y Mis Du, the black month: in Anglo Saxon, Blotmonath, the month of blood.

If ducks do slide at Hallowentide, at Christmas they will swim. If ducks do swim at Hallowentide, at Christmas they will slide! I am not sure as to whether we have had enough rain for swimming but we certainly have not yet had a frost worth talking about. There is an idea that the amount of berries on tree and bush foretell the severity of winter. Looking at the holly trees in my garden and the berries hips and haws in our Croxley hedgerows I do wonder if we should be looking out scarves and hats.

As can be imagined from the alternatives names given to November, this is the month when livestock was slaughtered prior to winter. This assured that there was sufficient winter grazing for the animals kept over as well as a good supply of meat for the cold winter months. Martinmas (11th or 22nd old style) was the traditional day to start. This was, and in some cases still is, the time to make sure that you have a good supply of firewood for the winter. Those of us fortunate enough to have an open fire can look forward to watching the flames build fire pictures and the roasting of chestnuts, the toasting of bread (the best toast in the world) and perhaps even the mulling of some ale or cider (heat a poker in the fire and when red hot plunge into the ale or cider and drink!). On the subject of firewood not all woods are the same. Oak burns well and the wood from a fruit tree will scent the room with an incense like perfume. Birch and fir logs are not good, burning too quickly but small sticks do make good kindling. Elder and willow are also disappointing, however "But ash logs all smooth and grey, burn them green or old. Buy up all that comes your way, they're worth their weight in gold!

Although the month of killing out surplus stock it is also the time to think about new and this is the month when many shepherds will be putting the tup (ram) to the carefully selected breeding ewes. We have borrowed a ram for our Herdwick sheep this year to avoid inbreeding and he is happily working his way round his harem and the flock-master and I are already looking forward to (and planning) next year's lambing.

Autumn, that seemed so late in coming is now really on us. The leaves are turning or have turned (collect them up and make leaf mold for the garden) and with the winds starting to come in we will soon see the bare branches of the trees. The old woodsman's idea that you can tell the shape of the tree by studying the shape of the leaf ribs is quite a reliable guide. This is the time of year that I see many of one of my favourite small birds, the long tailed tit, surely the most fascinating of the tit family.

I was in the wilds of Norfolk last weekend sheep dog training. I stayed overnight in a very small village with a few old houses, a former farm, a few new houses (nicely distributed), a pub and a church the size of small cathedral. When I left the pub and took Keira for a last walk two things immediately struck me, the absolute and delightful quiet with only the wind, an insomniac cock pheasant and a fox breaking the absolute hush. The second thing was the sky festooned with a myriad of stars plainly and brilliantly visible. There are, of course, no street lights in the village. We humans are creatures of light and our dependence on a lighted environment seems to increase in every generation. However, light pollution is a very serious issue and there is a move, nationwide, to reduce the amount of street lights left on during the night. Some will undoubtedly be unhappy about this but whether for fear of crime (research, I understand, has shown that crime actually decreases when the lights are out) or a more primeval fear and superstition I do not know.

I love this time of year. Standing looking out over a moor or sea or field etc. in the late afternoon, watching the effect of the wind and just listening is, to me, a great joy. If, in the country, I know that there will be much activity from the animals busily foraging to build up some extra layers for the long rest or the sparse days of winter.

Foraging for us still produces opportunity. As I look at the chart in John Wright's excellent little book "Hedgerow" I see that brooklime, common sorrel, dandelion roots, field rose, hawthorn berries, and sloes are still readily available. Not too late to think about next year's (and the year after) sloe gin!

As always, the best way to enjoy the countryside is to get out there, whether for a long walk or a short stroll. If you go for a car ride, take time to stop, turn off the engine, open the window and let your senses provide you with the joy of the countryside.

So, as the countryside starts to prepare for its winter sleep we start to think about our own preparations for winter and of course, for Christmas. So sample the sloe gin that you made a year or two back and check that it is ready (two or three glasses should give you enough evidence!) and lay in the firewood; but, if you need a new fire poker don't try and get one made on the 23rd as that is St Clement's Day, the patron of blacksmiths and a holiday in smithies everywhere!