

Blean Woods National Nature Reserve

Mid-September to mid-October 2025

It seems everybody's talking about it: no, not the Israeli-Hamas peace deal, important though that is, but the autumn colours that are unfurling rapidly and quite magnificently. You might imagine that we would be inured to this seasonal display, occurring as it does, unfailingly, every single year, but the truth is that no two years are ever quite the same, and the consensus is that this year's show is both earlier and more vivid than usual. The autumn palette is all down to trees' economy in wishing to conserve as much nutritional value as possible from their foliage prior to leaf-fall. So, much of the chlorophyll that gives the leaves their green colouring is resorbed, but some pigments, particularly carotenoids, are harder to break down and tend to remain in the leaves, imparting various shades of reds and browns. The long, hot summer then enabled trees to produce lots of foliage, together with an abundance of these pigments, now revealed in all their glory. But is this an early autumn? Phenology is the study of the timing of events in nature, from the arrival of the first swallow to the appearance of the first bluebell flowers. This is relatively easy to monitor, but its opposite, the recording of when things end, is much harder to be precise about. You may think that the swallow you see in November is the last one of the year, but who is to say that more won't pass through in succeeding days? There is a similar problem with recording the time of leaf-fall. It is next to impossible to define the start of autumn, either by the onset of leaf drop (which may occur during August storms), or the appearance of bronzed leaves, as that is such a slow and subjective process. So, I'm afraid I have no spreadsheet recording the "date" for autumn's arrival each year, but it does feel as though this year is exceptionally early. My sense is that forty years ago autumn was in full swing in the second half of October, only to be brought to an abrupt halt by early November gales, but that more recently the spectacle has started later and been prolonged well into November, the trees not stripped to their gaunt bones until the end of that month. This year, therefore, appears to be a reversion to type, but I am looking forward to more visual delights for several weeks to come.

Also much commented on this autumn is the wealth of acorns, and at times walking beneath an oak tree can feel precariously like negotiating a field of ball bearings. For the origins of this abundance we have to look further back, to 2024, which is when the buds destined to form this year's acorns were laid down. So the mast crop, as the fruits of beech and oak are sometimes referred to, owes more to the vagaries of last year's weather than the warmth we've enjoyed this year. Incidentally, I imagine the term "mast" was adopted hundreds of years ago when pigs were a mainstay of the rural economy, and were traditionally driven into the woods in autumn to feast on fallen crops of beech nuts and acorns. Indeed, the word is derived from the old German for food.

Hobbies arrive in England in April and May, but tend to delay breeding until June and July. This is because their preferred prey of large flying insects and inexperienced young birds become more available as the season progresses. So if you're lucky, you can see individuals, or a family party, in Blean Woods in September or October. Their dashing pursuits after prey aren't suited to dense woodland, so the best places to look out for them are over more open spaces, such as one of the heaths.

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