

By David Butwin / Illustration by Lloyd Miller

autumn *chase*

To Keats, autumn was the "Season of mists and mellow fruitfulness." Shelley, in "Ode to the West Wind," painted a darker image, of leaves fleeing like ghosts.

But what did the romantics know about fall? Did they ever hear a marching band strike up a fight song on a football afternoon, push a buddy into a pile of russet leaves, fill a grouchy neighbor's hubcaps with pebbles on Halloween? ▶▶▶

I have done all that, and each year with the first yellowing foliage and the last cricket sounds, the chase begins anew, taking me along leaf-bright roads that I know can only lead to a bittersweet end, namely winter. The habit was planted years ago in a Midwestern city where fall came and left all too rapidly. So a boy held onto the season all the more fiercely. There was the state fair, which arrived in August bringing a harvest's plenitude, touch football under arcs of shedding elms, then later, in the college years, a deep-throated roar 60,000 strong, rising from a brick stadium into a fast-approaching dusk.

These days, I tell people that to find fall I don't have to leave the north Jersey town where I live, blessed as it is with flame-red Norway maples. But it's mostly jest. For a deeper whiff, I can run up to the Hudson Valley and the Catskills, where the apples hang heavy and the Washington Irving characters Ichabod Crane and the headless horseman, two of my favorite autumn spirits, seem to lurk in the mists. But for maximum sensory exposure, I light out for New England. In my mind's eye it is a series of Kodachrome snapshots on pages in an old scrapbook.

Northwest Connecticut is impossibly scenic, an autumn travel poster come to life—white-steepled churches rising from maple-bordered village greens into deep-blue October skies. U.S. Route 7 and smaller offshoots pass increasingly gentrified towns such as New Preston, Warren, Salisbury, the perfect Washington, and noble Litchfield with its big-shouldered mansions. I aim for Kent, which I love for the very reason some area gentry sniff at it: the bustle and buzz, the bands of grumbling motorcycles and hikers coming off the Appalachian Trail, and other outsiders drawn to the shops, cafés, and galleries. I prowl the excellent Kent Memorial Library Book Fair. This event runs every weekend through Columbus Day, its rows and rows of new and used books spilling out to the curb.

Up past the Massachusetts Berkshires, U.S. Route 7 leads to Rutland, Vermont, a gateway to the Green Mountains. Fall's early tip-offs are these: a lot of L.L. Bean flannel, ads in the *Rutland Herald* for pumpkin-, apple-, and potato-picking at local farms, and—oh, painful harbinger of winter—rising stacks of chopped-up logs beside every house. East of Rutland on U.S. Route 4, Woodstock is a postcard village that's as polished as New York's Woodstock is funky and artsy. I push on a dozen miles to tiny Barnard, or more precisely the Barnard General Store.

The white frame Barnard store is stuffed with baskets of apples and cheeses, mums, pumpkins, and ornamental corn stalks. The deli will pack you a sumptuous sandwich for a picnic by Silver Lake, its far shore ablaze with color. Or gaze on the lake from the soda counter in back—no fancy coffee but rich ice creams and plenty of cracker-barrel gossip.

Cross the New Hampshire line and head north for the Kancamagus Highway—"the Kanc"—which runs 34 roller-coaster miles from Lincoln to Conway. It's a Scenic Byway and a real showoff in the fall. In late September, the higher

reaches have entered the blushing stage, ditto with the swamp maples down in the low-lying ponds, while in between it's still mostly green.

You're in the White Mountains, and fall only gets better 35 miles north around Bretton Woods, at the foot of Mount Washington. A web of fine hiking trails leads away from the Mount Washington Hotel, a sprawling, century-old resort. The tallest, meanest peak in the Northeast, the 6,288-foot Mount Washington poses a stiff hiking challenge. I am happy to take on the gentler Mount Willard, 1.4 miles one-way, with a 900-foot vertical rise and a gorgeous payoff at trail's end. You peer over a steep precipice at the U-shaped Crawford Notch, a green valley slashed with bright Crayola hues and the gray squiggles of U.S. Route 302 and the Maine Central Railroad.

If the New England fall can be distilled in one event, it's the Fryeburg Fair, on 180-acre, pine-bordered grounds in Fryeburg, Maine, just east of the New Hampshire line. Maine's two-dozen agricultural fairs are spread across the summer and early fall, and Fryeburg's, one of the last on the docket (October 1–8 this year), is by many accounts the best. There are white livestock barns, oxen pulls, shiny vintage tractors, horseraces, rides of chance, sinful eats, and grange halls displaying prizewinning onions, woolens, quilts, jams, pies, and cookies. Doughnut mavens flocking to Tom's Jumbo Donuts have just two choices—sugar or glazed. I hold my hunger for the big turkey farmers' tent serving up turkey on a bun with stuffing and cranberries, open-faced sandwiches, and full platters with all the trimmings.

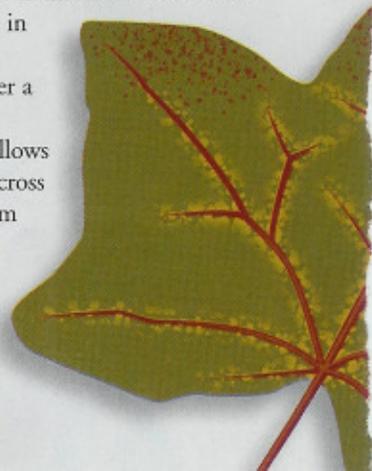
These fairgoers are not drop-ins from distant cities and suburbs; they are mostly northern New Englanders, people who know their way around orchards, fields, and barns. I stand beside a man as he lifts his young grandson over a railing to pet a sleekly groomed goat.

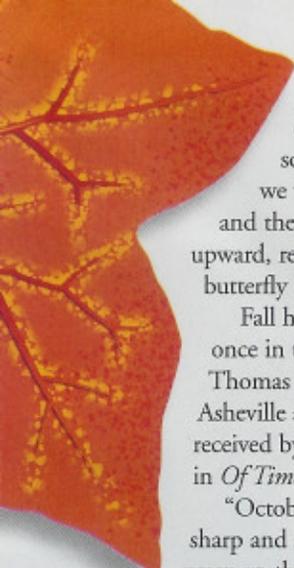
"Be careful," I say to the boy.

"He's OK," says the man. "He's got two of 'em at home."

I give short shrift to a wreath-making demo and a Christmas tree exhibit set across a lawn. Nothing against Christmas; I just want to keep winter at bay a little longer.

The beauty of the autumn chase is that if I miss it in the Northeast, it will be waiting down in the Virginias or North Carolina, Kentucky or Tennessee. I remember a painfully beautiful October day, tramping through the hills and hollows near Hinton, West Virginia, just across the misty ridges from Virginia. I am following a friend and his squirrel gun. "Damnation!" he shouts, as one shot after another scares up crows and pheasants, bringing





down showers of yellow leaves but no squirrels. I silently root for the squirrels as we walk on through dazzling woods. Now and then I see a falling leaf dart sideways or upward, revealing its true identity: a monarch butterfly heading south.

Fall has brought me to my knees more than once in the highlands of western North Carolina. Thomas Wolfe, who bled long passages about Asheville and surroundings—not always well received by the local citizenry—wrote of autumn in *Of Time and the River*.

“October had come again, and that year it was sharp and soon: frost was early, burning the thick green on the mountain sides to massed brilliant hues of blazing colors, painting the air with sharpness, sorrow and delight—and with October.”

Western Carolina, colored by poplar, ash, hickory, and maple, can lay claim to the longest fall in the country, owing to the varied elevations and a later-arriving winter. On a visit I made some years ago, before a spate of hotel- and motel-building in the area, the overflow of leaf peepers had to be put up in an Asheville high-school gym. It helps to aim for weekdays, but even then traffic can be rush-hour slow on the Blue Ridge Parkway, the lofty 470-mile route that meanders from southern Virginia and past Asheville to

the Great Smoky Mountains National Park. Every car in the procession, it seems, is pointing for Mount Mitchell, at 6,684 feet the highest peak in eastern North America.

I put up with the slow going long enough to look down on puffs of cottony fog that fill the gorges before burning off to reveal blazing yellow woodlands. Then I drop down to explore lower roads—U.S. Route 19E, which passes through tidy Burnsville, 276 southwest of Asheville, and through fiery hardwood forests slashed with numerous falls and hiking trails. East of Asheville, the season's bounty spills over at the Western North Carolina Farmers Market: baskets of apples, bags of stone-ground bran, unfinished-wood rockers, dolls done like witches and hobgoblins, slabs of sugar-cured bacon, cider by the cup and jug. From here you get a glorious, wide-angle view of the mountains and the 250-room Biltmore Estate, that grand and grandiose American chateau that performs its own autumn festival, Harvest Home Celebration, September 8–October 22.

But my fondest memory of Wolfe's *You Can't Go Home Again* country is the nightly racket of the katydids, those insistent grasshoppers that start their song at dusk. *Ka-pow!* goes the sound, rocketing back and forth across the coves and hollows. At the Alpine Inn in Little Switzerland, I'm told that the katydids come out six weeks before the first frost.

We have katydids in north Jersey, though not in profusion, so I track the fleeing season by other noises. There's the nightly cricket crescendo, which grows louder as summer fades, then slowly gives up the ghost with the first cold snap. Some nights, I sit on my front step drinking in the keening racket, touched by the beauty and melancholy of it all.

Well into November, you can go out in the morning and hear a faint peeping in the grass, as the last insect holdouts sing out against the deluge. Or you're out raking leaves, loving the ritual, even if every stroke brings winter closer, when the air is rent by a loud wailing, like a hundred barking dogs. You look up through undressed trees to see a phalanx of Canada geese, nosing south.

It all connects, of course, with those long-ago green-gold days in the Midwest. You move away, but you never lose the scent, the pang. Out there I loved spring, too, learned to smell it weeks away across the March snows, but I fell harder for fall, knowing the hurt that would come with the beauty. One August, I went back to make a canoeing trip with a couple of friends in the Boundary Waters of northeastern Minnesota. It was still deep summer in that watery wilderness, and we paddled in T-shirts and shorts. On the last day, we were headed back to the base in Ely when a cloud blew up, a breeze ruffled the water. I turned around in the canoe to tell the guide what I sensed, but he beat me to it.

“Smells like fall,” he said. ■

David Butwin, a frequent *HEMISPHERES* contributor, has written for *Gourmet*, *AARP*, and *Esquire*. A resident of *Leonia*, New Jersey, he will once again this year pursue his three autumn amours, foliage, football, and county fairs.

Fall for Me

FYI

If you go out to look for foliage and fall, here is some handy contact info. For a nationwide update on leaf peeping prospects, try stormfax.com/foliage.htm or contact the **USDA Forest Service** at www.fs.fed.us/news/fallcolors or Tel: 800-354-4595.

For individual states that trumpet their colors:

Maine mainefoliage.com or Tel: 888-624-6345

Massachusetts massvacation.com or Tel: 800-227-

6277 **New Hampshire** visitnh.gov or Tel: 800-258-

3608 **Vermont** vtweb.com/foliage/peak.shtml or

Tel: 800-837-6668 **Connecticut** ctbound.org

West Virginia wvtourism.com or Tel: 800-225-5982

North Carolina visitnc.com or Tel: 866-653-2837

Early autumn fairs are a good place to meet the season head-on. Maine's **Fryeburg Fair** is a beauty, up near the New Hampshire line just east of Conway (October 1–8 this year; fryeburgfair.com). Another Maine standout is the **Common Ground Country Fair** in Unity, a celebration of rural living and organic farming, September 22–24 (mofga.org). A New England fair for all tastes, the **Eastern States Exposition** (the Big E) in West Springfield, Massachusetts (September 15–October 1; thebige.com), draws participants and guests from up and down the eastern seaboard and beyond. For an early taste of fall, the **Minnesota State Fair** in St. Paul (August 24–September 4; mnstatefair.org) is one of the best, biggest, and oldest of its kind. —D.B.