

# Making the Most of our Seasons

**I**n Britain we've lost many of our day to day connections with nature. The daily and seasonal rhythms that would have directed our lives in the past now appear to have little significance. Much of our population exist in a world of artificial light and central heating where the weather is only a minor inconvenience and where seasonal harvests no longer shape our diets and celebrations.

A recent study by the RSPB has found that only 1 in 5 children have a reasonable connection with nature. Does this matter? I think it does; there are many health benefits, both physical and mental, of being in tune with nature. When we increase our knowledge and understanding of the world around us and develop emotional attachments, we are then likely to adopt more sustainable practices. Inspiring an awareness and interest in our seasons is one way outdoor leaders can help in this process.

The links with nature are stronger in other parts of Europe, particularly those which are less urbanised. For example it

is common in many areas of Central and Eastern Europe to see families out in spring picking herbs for teas and medicines, in late summer gathering fungi and in autumn collecting fruit to press for juice and regional variations of schnapps and brandies. The Czech names for the months of the year tell a story from "Leden" (ice) in our January, "Kveten" (blossom) in May, to "Srpen" (sickle) in August, through to "Listopad" (leaf fall) in November. This helps remind us of the annual cycle of nature. I worked one summer in the early 1970s on a fruit farm in Kent, we started on strawberries in June, moving onto gooseberries and blackcurrants in mid-summer and finishing on the apples in September. Returning recently there is much less of the land under fruit as imported fruit arrives in Britain all year round from across the globe. In Hungary the seasonal harvests of strawberries, sour cherries and sweet cherries are a part of the calendar and in parts of Slovenia transhumance is still practised with cows moved in spring to high Alpine pastures and cheese made throughout the summer and brought down to the valleys.

Working in the outdoors we are well-placed to raise awareness of the seasons and help our groups

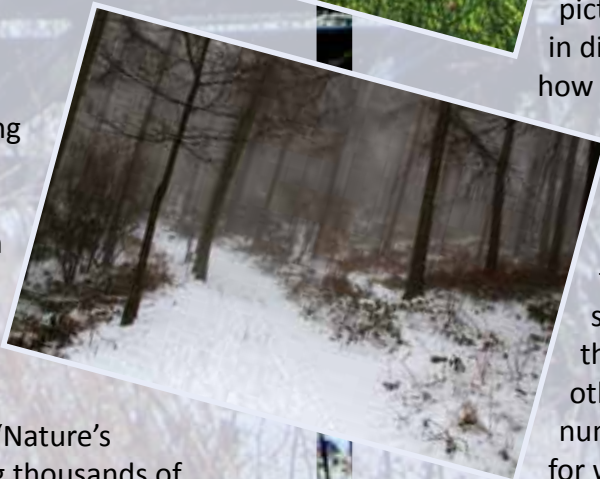




# EARTH WISE by Geoff Cooper

strengthen their connections with nature. You do not need to be an expert on the fauna and flora of Britain to have an impact. There are organisations which provide information and guidelines for outdoor leaders wishing to raise an interest in the natural world through the seasons. The recent BBC TV series on "The Great British Year" offers an excellent stimulus, showing the spectacular changes that take place throughout our islands. In association with these programmes, the Open University provide a free poster which offers ideas on what to observe at different times of the year and there is more detailed information on each of the seasons on their Open Learning website. BBC's "Springwatch" and "Autumnwatch" can also inspire young people to watch nature unfold outdoors.

Another example is the Woodland Trust which has for several years been running a "Nature's Calendar" survey by recruiting thousands of volunteers across Britain to record the signs of the seasons where they live. They provide information on common species of flowers, birds, butterflies and amphibians and annual events that occur. For example, the wheatear is a common bird we frequently see on moorland and mountains in Britain. It is easily distinguished by its striking white rump which earned it the original descriptive name of "white arse", which



was later sanitised to wheatear. This little bird is a big traveller arriving in our uplands between March and May from sub-Saharan Africa. So the return of this specie and others such as the osprey, cuckoo or spotted flycatcher can be recorded as events in Britain's nature calendar. Other events which can be observed readily with groups outdoors are the opening of first flowers such as snowdrops, coltsfoot or dandelions; the appearance of frog spawn in ponds; blue tits collecting nesting material; the first ripe blackberries or first tints of autumn. When thousands of such recordings are made across Britain, it is possible to build up a picture of when the seasons change in different areas of the country and how the changes vary from year to year.

This is valuable information and it may be possible to link key seasonal events and changes in numbers of plants and animals to climate change. Such surveys show that certain species such as the cuckoo are in decline whilst others such as otters are increasing in numbers. This clearly has implications for wildlife management.

Whether we are with groups on adventurous activities, doing fieldwork or making visits in the outdoors it isn't difficult through observation and a little knowledge to trigger interests in the seasons that can be transferred from the deepest countryside to the busiest city. ■

## References:

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