

Autumn Leads to Survival of the Fittest



There's nothing like an autumn stroll along a park trail to clear your mind. Nature's brilliant palette of gold, orange and red leaves provides a tranquil setting for hikers, bikers and nature lovers of all ages. Behind the scenes, autumn's glorious backdrop has a more ominous meaning for those who call the forest home. It signals a flurry of activity upon which survival depends. In nature, autumn is fight-or-flight time.

"Autumn is the most crucial time for survival," said Park Authority naturalist Tony Bulmer. "The animals that were babies in spring are big enough now to manage on their own, so they're being pushed out because the competition for food is fierce."

Bulmer says the first frost wipes out most insects, and birds that prefer warmer climates start to fly south for the winter. At the same time, animals and reptiles that live here year-round are in a frenzy preparing to hunker down for the winter.

"Animals start looking for a den for safety, snakes and reptiles look for shelter in hollowed-out logs or under porches, and other small animals take cover under the fallen leaves," he said. "Squirrels and chipmunks are busy gathering food to store for the winter. It is the most crucial activity for survival. They have to get it done."

Those that are the best at it will survive the winter dining on their cache and emerge again in springtime. Only one species will sleep through it all. "The woodchuck is the one, true hibernator in this area," Bulmer said.

Even the trees ready themselves for winter by shedding their leaves and conserving water in their trunk and branches. The leaves themselves help assure the trees will live to see another spring. "The leaf litter is the most important layer of the forest because it provides fertilizer that regenerates the forest floor and provides a safe, warm habitat that helps small animals survive the winter," Bulmer said.

The falling leaves are nature's colorful assurance that the ecosystem will take root in spring. That's when wildflowers herald the coming warmer weather, wildlife returns to the forest, and nature's lifecycle begins anew.

The Park Authority offers nature programs year-round.
To learn more, turn to the Nature and Outdoor Recreation sections.

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