

# Welcome Downeast

## The Towns, the Bays, the Mountains

*Snowflakes are the wheels of the storm  
chariots, the wreck of chariot wheels  
after a battle in the skies, these  
glorious spangles, the sweepings of  
heaven's floor. He takes up the waters  
of the sea in his hands, leaving the salt,  
he disperses it in mist through the  
skies, he recollects and sprinkles it like  
grain... over the earth, there to rest  
until it dissolves its bonds again.*

— Henry David Thoreau, 1817-1862

### Dear Friends:

The cold has settled in at last. One recent sub-zero morning your commentator looked out over Passamaquoddy Bay through sea smoke rising 100 feet into the sky and backlit by the sun, a breathtaking sight. Gulls circled and scolded us for our depredations and degradation of the seas, and deer gathered on Poverty Rock for a conference on browse and forage. The ground is now frozen hard and the frost goes deeper where there is little snow cover.

In case you are wondering what the various species of earthworms do at this time of year—and who wouldn't be?—some lay their eggs in cold-hardy cocoons and just leave them to hatch in spring. Others, like night-crawlers, burrow down below the frost line and rest until the ground thaws. Ground-dwellers like moles and voles do not hibernate but rest in their deep burrows, eating insect larvae, worms, or seeds they have cached, and occasionally coming out to forage during warm spells. Meanwhile squirrels, field mice, and chipmunks



hunker down in warm burrows lined with various types of insulation and venture forth to find food from time to time. It's not all that different from what we do, come to think about it—except that we watch football.

### Natural events, January

*The Old Farmer's Almanac* calls this coming moon cycle the Snow Moon. That is fitting enough as Northerners around the world live with snow for many months of the year. It is said that the Eskimos have 100 words for snow; by midwinter many Mainers have at least that many, not all of them fit for polite company. Getting around in the snow calls for ingenuity, energy, and the right equipment. Snowshoes made of bent ash and rawhide were used in these boreal climes for ages before the white man came. Native designs are strikingly beautiful as well as functional. Modern snowshoes differ from the indigenous in materials but are similar in design, if not in beauty. Skis came to this country with immigrants from Scandinavia. The first snowmobile may have been the Lombard Log-hauler, developed in Waterville, Maine, in the early 20th century. It

was a steam engine equipped with steerable double skis in front and crawler treads in the back, and weighed from 10 to 30 tons. It was used to haul logs out of the woods and could pull 125 cords at a time, replacing 50 horses or oxen. You can see Lombard Log-haulers in Waterville where there's a museum dedicated to them. The modern snowmobile cannot haul 125 cords of wood, but it is now the preferred means of winter travel in Northern climes from Maine to the Arctic and around the globe.

### Field and forest report

Heavy snows keep most critters denned up. Deer struggle through deep drifts and become more vulnerable to predators. Small mammals burrow through the snow looking for a meal. Overwintering songbirds hide away in heavy brush cover while the blizzards rage, and then come swooping and twittering out when things calm down. Finches and chickadees chatter and flit gaily above, lifting the spirits of the poor, wingless, furless, joyless mammals grimly shoveling snow below: They seem to be saying, "Look up and see us darting under pale skies, tiny downy bundles of life, ever cheerful, ever chirping, ever up for the next meal."

### Critters of the season

River otters (*Lontra canadensis*) are great sliders down snowy slopes or across icy ponds, but for getting around in the snow the snowshoe hare (*Lepus americanus*) knows no equal. The snowshoe hare has enormous hind feet covered with fur to protect them from cold and to help them walk on snow. These hares turn white in winter for protective coloring. They are the prey of many carni-

ILLUSTRATIONS BY CANDICE HUTCHINSON

vores, including man, and are the preferred food of the Canada lynx (*Lynx canadensis*) whose population rises and falls with that of the snowshoe hare. According to the Maine Department of Inland Fisheries and Wildlife, snowshoe hares mate three or four times a year beginning in March here in Maine, but 80 to 95 percent of juvenile hares are killed by predators in the first year. The hare leaves a distinctive and unmistakable track in the snow, which looks like two large exclamation points. You can't miss it.

### Snowy events, February

Last year, many records for snowfall were broken during the quarter moon now past, which leaves us wondering how it will all unfold this time around. Eastport surpassed all historical records for the entire state of Maine with 76 inches over a 10-day period. Other coastal towns and islands broke their own records as well. One wonders how these calculations are made. With all the high winds and variations in depth,

snow that fell from the sky over Quebec City might well have finally come to rest in Meddybemps or Mattawamkeag or Mapleton. Your commentator leaves the higher science to meteorologists and simply declares that he had never seen that much snow at once in 50 years of New England winters.

Systematic weather statistics have only been gathered since the late 19th century, but it's likely that our forebears endured harder winters than ours, and their endurance inspires us—especially when we remember that they had no central heating, no running water, no indoor plumbing, and no snow plows. Listen to this time-worn winter wisdom from the Old Farmer's Almanac:

From 1804: *A full purse, a full table, a full mow, a full stable, and a pleasant wife make winter pass cheerily with the farmer. In cold stormy evenings, ... secure from the tempest, he enjoys more real happiness over his cider mug and book than any nobleman of Europe or nabob of India amid pomp and grandeur.*

From 1858: *By the way, smoking that*



*pipe over the kitchen fire is not going to make you either wiser or richer; and you had better knock out the ashes, and the pipe, too, and be reading some book that will give you information about your business, or looking to your tools and getting them ready for spring work.*

From 1946: *Now is the time of the deep snows—and thrice blessed is the neighbor who will plow you out. A mug of good steaming coffee or something bracing from the bottle behind the clock will be just the thing for him when he has bucked out your drifts. A touch of neighborly*

*kindness goes a long ways—and there'll be more storms coming.*

### Rank opinion

After an unprecedented week or two of big weather, it is easy to see why the ancients associated powerful storms with powerful gods and saw the depredations of weather as punishment for human wrongs. When one blizzard follows so closely on another and then another, we mortals may raise our eyes to heaven and say, "Why us, why us? What have we done to deserve this?" When back and shoulders ache from shoveling and getting to the store for supplies is a major chore, we may begin to wonder what our sins might be. Let's not flatter ourselves too much by thinking that Nature is so concerned with our petty individual faults or failings. And yet it is good to remember how the ancients all agreed that our wrongs, our greed, and our blindness can do harm to the divine and delicate harmonies of the earth and the skies and the whole Creation.

### Field and forest report

With snow so deep in the forests and fields, woods work slows down, but the job of hauling out lumber, chips, and firewood goes on through the coldest months by some of the hardest workers in Maine. In commercial orchards, orchardists struggle to get the pruning done. There have been some reports of pruning apple trees on snowshoes; much easier to reach the branches. The skiers are the happiest of all, with boundless tracts of white to traverse through the woods and fields and down the mountains.

### Natural events

During these cold midwinter days while much of the world is gray, white, and black like a chickadee's back, or with a touch of blue like a blue jay's wing, what should appear in the mail but brightly-colored seed catalogs, their pages shimmering with all the shades of the rainbow—the smiling faces of flowers and the plump bodies of pumpkins and squashes, cabbages, beans, beets, berries, and rutabagas. Like travel brochures

from another country, the seed catalogs remind us what our own local gardens, farms, and fields will look like when all the colors return to us and we return to them in the country of summer.

### Seedpod to carry around with you

From Frances W. Wile, 1878-1939: "All beautiful the march of days as seasons come and go; the hand that shaped the rose hath wrought the crystal of the snow, hath sent the hoary frost of heaven, the flowing waters sealed, and laid a silent loveliness on hill and wood and field."

That's the almanack for this time. But don't take it from us—we're no experts. Go out and see for yourself.

Yr. mst. humble & obd'nt servant,  
Rob McCall



*Rob McCall lives way downeast on Moose Island. This almanack is excerpted from his weekly radio show, which can be heard on WERU FM (89.9 in Blue Hill, 99.9 in Bangor) and streamed live via [www.weru.org](http://www.weru.org).*

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# Welcome Downeast

## The Towns, the Bays, the Mountains

***“Be a gardener, dig a ditch, toil and sweat, and turn the earth upside down, and seek the deepness and water the plants in time. Continue this labor and make sweet floods to run and noble and abundant fruits to spring. Take this food and drink and carry it to God as your true worship.”***

— Julian of Norwich

### Dear Friends:

New green is beginning to show on trees and shrubs up and down the coast. Daffodils are in bloom and dandelions too in sheltered southern exposures.

How do woody plants survive the bitter cold winters? Their basic strategy is to raise the sugar content of their sap and draw most of it down into the roots underground when the growing season ends and the cold winds begin to blow. Just enough is kept in the buds to keep them alive until the sun begins to warm the ground and the plant knows it’s time to pump the sap back up, we know not how.

During the winter, these tender buds on trees and shrubs are protected from the cold by tough bud scales that cover their soft flesh completely, sort of like us when we bundle up from head to toe to venture out into the snow. In spring, the buds throw off their cloaks and unfurl their leaves and flowers to the mighty sun, with a silent cheer for the season ahead. We do the same. On a sunny day we take off our jackets, maybe even our shirts, and sit in the sunshine with all new hopes, dreams, and plans dancing in our heads, and the old dog lying beside.

### Field and forest report, May

Apple buds are just beginning to show their tiny green leaves here along the coast and daffodils are in bloom. Mosses and lichens now enjoy their hour in the sun before the leaves return them to the shadows.

Since 1978, the third full week in May has been designated as “Arbor Week” by the Maine legislature. Studies show that trees add to natural beauty, property values, and community spirit—as well as absorbing CO<sub>2</sub>, filtering the air for those nearby, and providing beauty, food, lumber, and firewood. This is a good time to plant trees in private and public spaces. Shovels ready! Dig!

***In spring, the buds throw off their cloaks and unfurl their leaves and flowers to the mighty sun, with a silent cheer for the season ahead. We do the same.***

### Natural events

We are cheered by the return of the songbirds, even if they are of the most common varieties. When a dozen goldfinches mob the feeders and spangle the surrounding trees with yellow while waiting their turns, it is a delight to the heart, never mind that goldfinches are numerous everywhere. When crows drop in for popcorn, we watch them with wonder for their sociability, for their cleverness, and simply for their pure and shimmering blackness—no matter that they are one of the most widespread birds on earth. When robins



come a’worming we watch them with pleasure as they cock their heads, bob and bend, and draw a wiggling worm from the ground.

Even squabbling seagulls deserve a measure of respect for their stately elegance: their smart gray-and-white uniforms that are impeccably clean despite all the garbage they eat, their brilliant yellow beaks with a bright red spot, their arrogant and withering gaze, their trumpeting call, and their grand wing-spread and gliding flight. If gulls were not so numerous, Audubon’s apostles would come from all over just to observe them, but alas, there are just too many seagulls.

Serious birders, it seems, must look for the more charismatic species, the endlessly confusing warblers, the rare thrushes and wrens and finches, the once-in-a-lifetime sightings. Still, the Lord must love common birds, too, because there are so many of them. Never mind the celebrity songbirds. We wouldn’t trade one single bright and flitting goldfinch for six pallid Blackburnian warblers.

ILLUSTRATIONS BY CANDICE HUTCHISON



**Field and forest report**

Shadbush (*Amelanchier spp.*), also called Juneberry or Serviceberry, comes into bloom about now with its delicate white star-shaped blossoms on a copper background. This shrub has served for thousands of years as a wilderness food. The First People dried the berries and pounded them together with venison to make pemmican that would keep unspoiled for months and provide protein and energy while on the trail. Also coming into bloom are various types of wild cherry including wild black cherry (*Prunus serotina*) and choke cherry (*Prunus Virginiana*). Note that choke cherry can be poisonous to browsing animals.

**Natural events, June**

Though it is still spring and some of the slower trees like the beech and the ash have not entirely leafed out yet, we see unmistakable signs that summer is

around the corner. Along with the new green covering the Earth we see changes in the skies. The low gray overcast so often seen in winter and spring gives way to a pale Wedgwood blue, while billowing cumulus clouds sail like tall mountain peaks through the ether. The sun is different too. Instead of squinting at us from close to the horizon and throwing long shadows across the land, sunlight beams down now from far overhead, warming dark corners and leaving almost no shadow at noon time. The winds back around now to the south and west and are laden with the rich scents of blossoms and vernal pastures, instead of the fumes of 25 million petroleum belching chimneys. There is no aroma like that of an early June morning. Perhaps we'll take some canning jars out to the fields and the shore and capture some of the precious perfume, then screw on the lids and bring them home to be opened and inhaled next February.

**Field and forest report**

Shadbush is losing its petals and apples and lilacs are in bloom this week, calling on the bees, both wild and domesticated, to do their life's work while they can. Thousands of hives are brought into the

state of Maine at this season to pollinate our orchards and blueberry barrens. The work they do is crucial to our agricultural economy, though their numbers are sadly diminished by colony collapse disorder. Meanwhile, the wild bees—bumble bees, digger bees, sweat bees, miner bees—help out. Altogether there are more than 270 species of wild bees in Maine. It is critical that insecticides be used only when absolutely necessary to save the crop, or even these wild bees may be threatened. And it would help if consumers weren't so fussy about a few bumps and blemishes on their apples.

**Saltwater report**

The endangered North Atlantic right whale makes its home in the Gulf of Maine and is the subject of some mildly encouraging news: Due to the hard work of many fishermen and others who love the sea, this whale's numbers are slowly but surely increasing. With a

population down to about 300 in the early 1990s, this most endangered of marine mammals now numbers about 520, a fairly healthy recovery considering that females do not give birth until age

*Due to the hard work of many fishermen and others who love the sea, the endangered North Atlantic right whale's numbers are slowly but surely increasing.*

nine or 10 and produce only one calf every three to six years.

In February, the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration announced that it was outlining much larger protected areas for this beleaguered Leviathan, extending its northern sanctuary between Cape Cod and Nova Scotia to over 21,000 square nautical miles. The chief causes of mortality for

right whales are being struck by our boats and being entangled in our fishing gear. These are tragedies we can do something about, as long as the will is there.

**From the mailbag**

From time to time we like to share some of the responses to the Almanack. From Kathie on Monhegan Island: "Hurray for hand tools! Three of us went to prepare planting beds for the farm—trowels, shovels, rakes, wheelbarrows; we could carry on a conversation and hear the sweet twitterings of the newly arrived swallows... Later [we] will go out with scythes and harvest hay to use for mulch—lots of attention and lots wanting to try it; the rhythm of the scythe, the swish of the grass, and the neat way it quietly falls over—quite an experience!" From Melissa on Prince Edward Island: "There is a willow along the road I travel to work. Every day I am reminded of the story of the young woman who is turned

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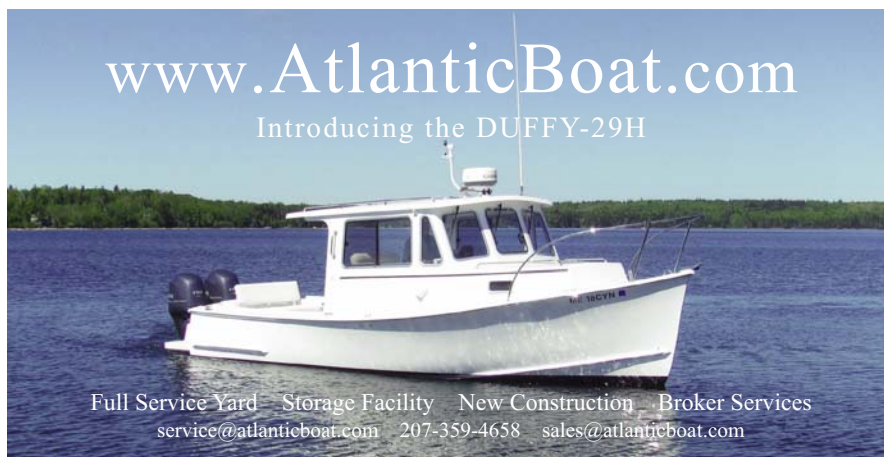
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A L M A N A C K

into a willow. This tree with its golden limbs covered in delicate green leaves truly looks like a person raising arm branches up to the sky." From Peter in Michigan: "Planting asparagus today; moving some rhubarb ... Seedlings doing well ... Have not used a weed-killer in 40 years of gardening." From George in Arizona: "Thanks for ... assuring me that there are others on the same path through the wonderful forest."

**Rank opinion**

This year marks the 51st anniversary of the posthumous publication of Rachel Carson's *A Sense of Wonder*. What is so pleasing in these messages from readers of this Almanack is the sense of wonder that nature and the changing of the seasons engenders in human hearts. These are all mature adults and yet the child-like joy and awe have not been extinguished by their years of life through storm and

*The childlike joy and awe have not been extinguished. Wonder is revolutionary.*

sun on this mortal coil. From that wonder grows the love of Nature and the desire to preserve the soil, air, and water for all creatures. Wonder is revolutionary.

**Seedpod to carry around with you**

From Rachel Carson: "If a child is to keep alive his inborn sense of wonder, he needs at least one adult who can share it, rediscovering with him the joy, excitement, and mystery of the world we live in."

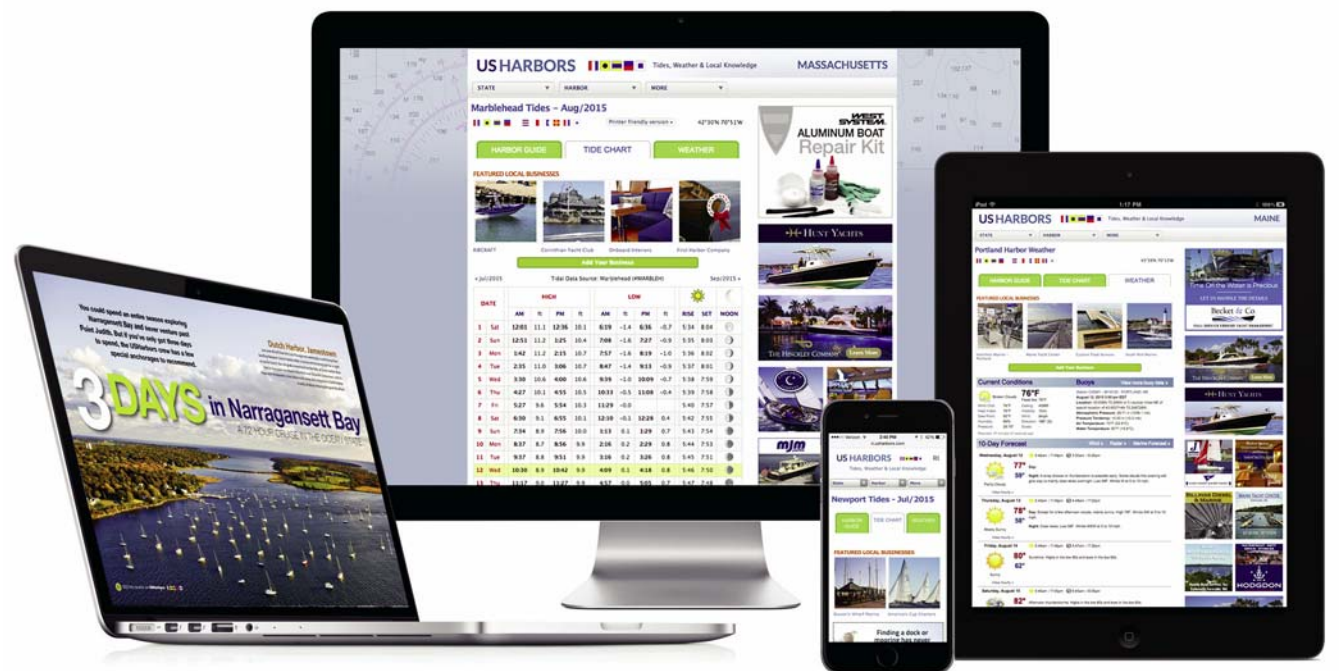
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Yr. mst. humble & obd'nt servant,  
Rob McCall ★

*Rob McCall lives way downeast on Moose Island. This almanack is excerpted from his weekly radio show, which can be heard on WERU FM (89.9 in Blue Hill, 99.9 in Bangor) and streamed live via [www.weru.org](http://www.weru.org).*

To those readers who caught our error in last issue's column: Maine is not in a time warp and St. Patrick's Day indeed still falls in March. We inadvertently rescheduled the holiday in our anxiousness to celebrate. —*The Editors*

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# Welcome Downeast

## The Towns, the Bays, the Mountains

***“I walk in your world, a mercy, a healing. Like a cooper of barrels you bind the mountains with ribbing. Your hand rests on the rambunctious seas, they grow peaceful, the brow of a sleeping child. Autumn is a king’s progress, largess lies ripe on the land. Up, down the furrow your Midas touch rains gold, rainbows are from your glance. Fall of rain, evenfall, all, all is blessing.” —Daniel Berrigan***

### **Dear Friends:**

The fall migrations have begun and the young of many creatures are striking out to find new territories. This includes many small mammals such as skunks, raccoons, porcupines, squirrels, mice, and others. The upright primates who make up a good part of our downeast population over the summer have already departed for cities and suburbs farther south, and smaller flocks leave every day, looking back with wistful faces at their treasured summer memories. Watching the geese, the ospreys, and the shore birds fly south and the songbirds pass through, one thinks of how ancient and universal is this phenomenon of migration.

Humans are among the planet’s greatest migrants, having left our original home in Central Africa to spread out and populate the whole planet looking for more room, more food, more safety, more opportunity for ourselves and our children. We will no more stop human migration than we will stop the geese

from flying south in the fall. Like other creatures, humans will always seek out a better situation for themselves and their children, marching to the drumbeat of species survival and singing the songs of a promised land somewhere—Canaan, Cibola, Norumbega, Pure Land, Shambala, America. My ancestors were immigrants to this country, so were yours, regardless of whether you are Native-American, European-American, African-American, Latino-American or any other kind of American.

### **Field and forest report, September**

If you have apple trees, you may be wondering when the apples are ripe for picking. Traditionally apples were either summer varieties picked in August or early September, fall varieties picked until early November, and winter varieties picked after the hard frost. Generally speaking the later they ripened, the longer they would keep. Nowadays the ripeness of an apple is determined by the Brix test refractometer, which shows the sugar level in the juice. The higher the sugar level, the riper the apple.

If you are willing to be a little less scientific, there are still several ways to

determine when your apples are ready. First, look at the apples: Are they fully colored? Have some of them fallen to the ground? Second, taste a few: Are they sweet or starchy? The sweeter the taste, the riper they are. Third, cut through the center and look at the seeds: Are they shiny and dark? Are they loose in their seed cavities? If the answer to all these questions is yes, then your apples are ready and it’s time to get your ladder and basket and start picking. Of course, one more test would be to eat several. If they give you the green apple quick-step, they are not ripe.

***Maybe you have been startled, as we were recently, going out to look at the night sky and nearly stepping on a very large slug.***

### **Critter of the month**

Maybe you have been startled, as we were recently, going out to look at the night sky and nearly stepping on a very large slug. This yellowish-gray creature with black stripes and spots is a Leopard slug, *Limax maximus*. It may reach a length of six inches and loves to prowl nocturnally. The leopard slug eats just about any kind of organic matter, including your garden, and also nibbles on several varieties of mushroom. It is native to the Mediterranean region and is an immigrant in many other countries and Maine.



ILLUSTRATIONS BY CANDICE HUTCHISON



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A W A N A D J O A L M A N A C K

### Natural events, October

As the sun rises later and sets earlier, our world slowly turns from green to gold. The leaves, which not so long ago were green, pale, and translucent, are now yellowing and opaque as brittle old paper. They seem to fall with relief, tired of holding on through storm and sun, eager to return to the earth. Unable to resist, they surrender gladly; leaf to leaf mold to soil to tree to leaf for ages and ages.

Here is a little ceremony of great power: to catch a leaf as it falls, before it reaches the ground, to stay the force of gravity for a moment, to interrupt the irresistible turning of the wheel of life for a few seconds, and to hold in your hand a piece of the great miracle, to feel its desire to fall back to the ground just as it desired to rise a few short moons ago. All of this is illuminated by what John Gardner called “October light” whereby the sun gives over its yellow and red and gold light to the leaves, and bleaches out to a pale, cool brightness coming in at a low angle and giving more light than heat.

### Saltwater report

Mackerel fishing proceeds apace from boats, floats, piers, and breakwaters up and down the coast. Mackerel is a fine-tasting fish, usually broiled or grilled to lose the extra oils. We welcome your favorite mackerel recipe.

Fishermen are hauling out their lobster traps and stacking them on the dock where they throw long checkered shadows in the afternoon until they are trucked home and stacked in the yard waiting for another spring. The lobster season has ended for most of the coast, but not on Monhegan Island where those hardy fishermen wait until later in October to put their traps in the water.

### Field and forest report

It's all pumpkin patches and squashes, Indian corn and corn mazes, apple cider and hayrides as city folks go to the country for the day, answering that primal urge to bring home some of the harvest. If you have some late transplanting of



trees, shrubs, or perennials, these warm days are a good time to do it, but you might want to give them a drink and a good blanket of mulch.

It's also a good time to spread a little lime and fertilizer in the garden, and if you have time, tuck it into bed with a blanket of seaweed. On warm afternoons, ladybugs swarm the west side of the house and hornets bump along looking for a hidey-hole. A tag team of bumblebees has been taking turns visiting their queen under the old floorboards in my shop for the past couple of weeks. We're getting along pretty well and managing to stay out of each other's way, but we do tumble into each other now and then.

### Natural events

In October, many hearts are kindled with an autumnal nostalgia of Currier and Ives harvests, glowing pumpkins, and

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cider seasoned with cinnamon: Many, but not all. There are those who still “rage against the dying of the light” and, like Dylan Thomas, face this season with sorrow, and a touch of fear.

In spring we witness the miracle of new life forming by the composition of the simplest elements: air and water and sun and soil. Bud becomes leaf and flower and branch. Plant life becomes

animal life. Randomness becomes symmetry. Chaos becomes order. Nothing becomes something; and death comes to life with a cry. In fall the wheel has turned and we witness the decomposition of life. Green turns yellow and brown. Fruit falls, softens and rots. All that is organic slows then stops to wait out the coming cold. Life falls apart, returns to its elements, and dies with a sigh.

### Rank opinion

Autumn is an achingly beautiful season even though, deep in our hearts, we know it is the season of dying. It teaches us that the fruits of a lifetime are often gathered near the end. It teaches us that we show our true colors as life wanes. It teaches us that death is not a thing unto itself, it is simply the other side of life. It teaches us that dying can be elegant and beautiful, too.

### Seedpods to carry around with you

From Elizabeth Lawrence, English horticulturalist 1907-1985: “Even if something is left undone, everyone must take time to sit still and watch the leaves turn.”

From Wei Ying Wu, 8th century: “The autumn nights grow longer, in the north forests startled crows cry out. Still high overhead, the star river stretches, the Dipper's handle set to southwest. The cold cricket grieves deep in the chambers, of the notes of sweet birds, none remain. Then one evening gusts of autumn come. One who sleeps alone thinks fondly on thick quilts. Past loves are a thousand miles farther each day... Man's life is not as the grass and trees, still the season's changes can stir the heart.”

That's the Almanack for this time. But don't take it from us—we're no experts. Go out and see for yourself.

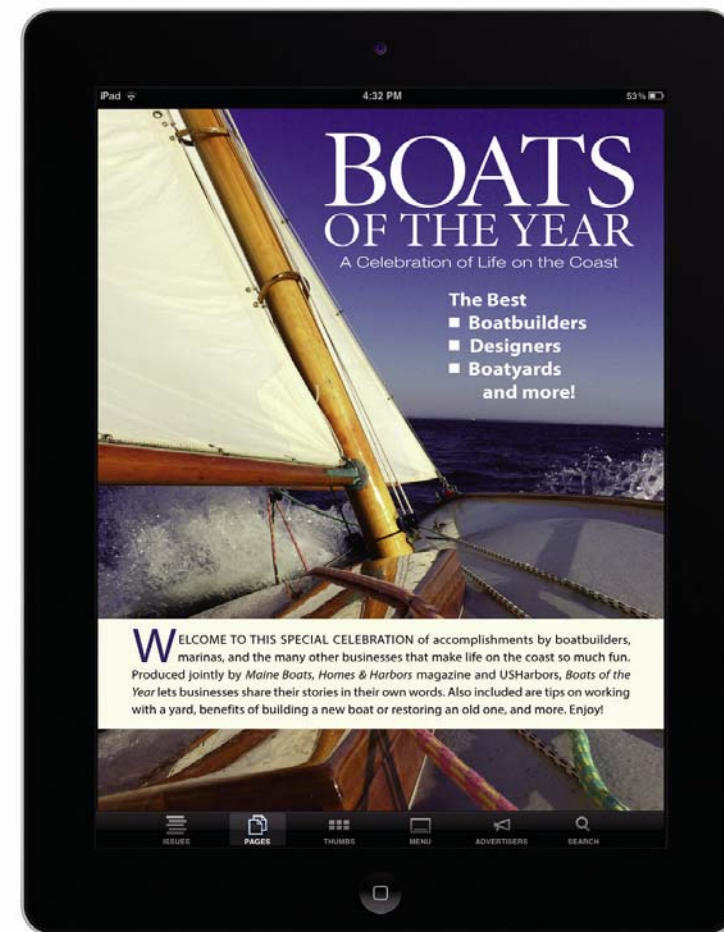
Yr. mst. humble & obd'nt servant,  
Rob McCall



Rob McCall lives way downeast on Moose Island. This almanack is excerpted from his weekly radio show, which can be heard on WERU FM (89.9 in Blue Hill, 99.9 in Bangor) and streamed live via [www.weru.org](http://www.weru.org).

# BOATS OF THE YEAR

A Celebration of Life on the Coast



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