

May 18, 2008
UUFTC, Sonora

A Bird's-eye View of our Spiritual Selves

On my weekends with you here in the Mother Lode, I stay in a double-wide mobile-home in Vallecito. My little country home is located on several acres owned by John and Renee Kramer. It has a beautiful view of the valley leading up toward Murphys, and it is surrounded by lots of trees. During the year, in various seasons, it serves as a stopping place for many kinds of birds – from tiny hummingbirds and white-breasted nuthatches to red-tailed hawks and other raptors. My front porch is a wonderful place to sit and observe this rich profusion of bird-life. My favorites arrive each spring. Hanging from a tree by my porch is an old bird-house. It has lost the little dowel for the birds to sit on. But every spring it is occupied by a family of western bluebirds, who use the house to raise a family. I have no idea whether it's the same family, of course, but I like to think that the same ones come back to visit me every year.

As I said, there's no little perch for the bluebirds to sit on, but that doesn't deter them in the slightest. I have been watching for three years now, and I still haven't figured out how they do this, but they simply fly right into the hole in the birdhouse and disappear. And when they emerge, they just come flying, with no hesitation right out of the hole. The mating pair seem to spend all the daylight hours hunting down food for their nestlings. Every few minutes one will fly back to the nest with some tasty bug for the chicks. They first perch on a branch where they look around to see if the coast is clear, and I imagine they are casting a wary eye at me, although I do my best to remain still. Then, they cast off and fly straight into the birdhouse, and after a minute or two, they fly right back out to continue the hunt. Imagine the energy these tiny creatures expend just to raise their family!

And for a few moments every morning, and every evening, I'm transported. Time is suspended while I watch this little family and try to imagine what their lives must be like. So much energy; so focused. And I think of these bluebirds, so competent at what they do, as they result of millions of years of evolution. And I stand in awe and wonder! I feel a greater sense of transcendence in connecting with the evolutionary process that brought these birds into being, than I would if I thought of them as creatures that were created just as they are by some kind of God. In connecting with wild creatures, we connect with nature, and we become intimately aware of the interdependent web of existence that connects us all.

Most of the birds we see are transients. They stop off to visit us at certain times of the year in the course of their migrations. Sometimes we get to observe them in their breeding plumage, but often their breeding takes place thousands of miles away. For centuries, naturalists have puzzled over this migration. How do these tiny creatures, with brains no bigger than maybe a raisin, figure out where to go on migrations that may be as much as 10,000 miles? How do they know where to stop along the way? A recent article in the journal *Nature*, reported recently in the *SF Chronicle*, suggests that scientists may be getting close to the answer. They have theorized for some time that birds use the earth's magnetic field to orient themselves on their journeys. But how? That was the question. One theory was that birds must have a molecule that changes a

bird's behavior depending on the inclination of the magnetic field around it. Scientists have now created a molecule that releases different amounts of a chemical depending on its location, and thus could tell a bird whether it is following the right north-south line and pinpointing its latitude. Once again, I stand in awe of this complex mechanism that has evolved in such tiny creatures.

I began to get into birding a few years ago. It was a way to be out on the waters of Tomales Bay and the beaches of Pt. Reyes National Seashore as I worked with the naturalists of Audubon Canyon Ranch. We would do systematic counts of both shore birds and water birds at specified times of the year. And the data we collected was a good indicator of the health of these areas. When food is available for them, the birds will come and linger. In those years when food isn't abundant, they will continue on quickly in their migration. The science involved is important, but primarily I do these counts because I love being in a position to observe these wonderful creatures. And in order to collect the data, I had to learn to identify the birds. I don't consider myself a serious birder at all, but I rarely go anywhere any more without my trusty copy of Roger Tory Peterson's field guide.

What is it that draws millions of people around the world to become birders? Well, for at least some of us, I believe that it takes us out of our everyday concerns and provides us with a connection to the spiritual part of our lives. On the front of our OOS this morning, I put an image of Francis of Assisi, who was known for his kindness not just to fellow humans, but to all creatures, and especially birds. Francis epitomizes for us the complex relationship between humans and birds. He implored the king to give up hunting birds; he built nests for a pair of turtle doves so that they would "be fruitful and multiply." Apparently, they took his suggestion to heart; they and their offspring are said to have lived in Francis's garden for many years. And legend has it that Francis preached a sermon to a gathering of birds, imploring them to be thankful for the gift of freedom to go anywhere, and to praise God.

In a moving new book, "The Life of the Skies," Jonathon Rosen, explores the connection between humans and birds, and the spiritual connection that brings the two together. Rosen spent weeks tramping around in southern swamps looking for the ivory-billed woodpecker, without any success, but he found spiritual sustenance in the looking. William Faulkner refers to the way people referred to the Ivory Bill as "the lord-God bird," suggesting that sighting may have been a spiritual experience for some. Rosen also searched in Israel and Palestine for birds that are found there and nowhere else.

Rosen writes of a sadness that comes with finding a connection with the avian world, a sense of longing, a sense of something that quite be fulfilled. Is this because humans have always wanted to be able to fly, and they feel sorrow at not being able to join the birds in their element? Perhaps. It is probably also because we sense something of what seeking people have always felt – a sense of something ineffable that we can't quite understand, something transcendent, a realm of the spirit that we can intuit but not quite experience fully.

Remember that in Chapter 2 of Genesis, Yahweh gives Adam the power to name the animals, including the birds. Giving someone the power to name is giving the namer a great deal of power in the relationship. Could this be what draws birders to carrying around their field guides and binoculars so that they can identify, and thus name, the

birds they see? Speaking from my own experience, I think that it does. I feel empowered, and also a sense of connection, when I can say, “Oh yes, that’s a belted kingfisher,” rather than just “Oh that’s a pretty bird!”

And Rosen suggests that this same impulse – the desire to have power over and thus to feel closer to – may account for the human impulse, over the centuries, to hunt birds and to kill them. In the 19th Century, even naturalists who were studying birds, such as Audubon, and Darwin, and Wallace, took large numbers of specimens of the birds they were studying. And, of course, through hunting, humans have managed to extirpate some species completely, such as the Great Auk and the Passenger Pigeon, and to come close in the case of other species, such as the Whooping Crane. And nowadays, when birders keep “life lists,” and photographs of birds they have observed, are they exercising this same impulse on a more benign level? Certainly there can be an air of extreme competitiveness and ownership among present-day birders.

I referred to Darwin and Wallace, and it’s worth considering how their scientific work involved birds. Many of Darwin’s evolutionary insights, of course, stemmed from his observations of finches in the Galapagos during the voyage of the Beagle. Even here, with species isolated on distant islands, Darwin observed that different finches had very different kinds of beaks. He realized different beaks had different purposes – some were large and heavy for crushing nuts, others were long and thin for picking seeds out of cacti, and so forth. Back in England, Darwin’s finch specimens helped to develop the theory of natural selection, as he saw how the different beaks had evolved to enable the finches to occupy different niches.

Meanwhile, Alfred Russel Wallace was developing his own version of the theory of natural selection in the Indonesian archipelago. Darwin got the lion’s share of the credit, but Wallace was close, if not equal to, Darwin in his formulation of evolutionary theory. Wallace’s explorations in the South Seas began for his quest for the “bird of paradise,” something he had heard of but never seen. And indeed, in 1862, Wallace showed up in London with two live birds of paradise in a large cage. Wallace had cared for them on the long sea voyage from Singapore. The bird of paradise, never before seen in Europe, had a yellow head, black face, blue bill, green eyes, chocolate underparts, and, most extraordinary of all, long dangling plumes of creamy yellow and milky white.

So our complex relationship with wild birds certainly includes the knowledge that scientists have gained from studying birds. And along side this scientific connection, and often overlapping it, is the spiritual connection that many of us find in observing birds. This has been true for many observers over the centuries. In this morning’s reading, Mary Oliver compares a great blue heron and great egret to “a preacher” and an “old Chinese poet,” giving them an explicit spiritual connotation. They great each other in the early morning light, they’re joined by some more herons, and then what? They spend a lazy summer day fishing! Oliver gives us an image that would do credit to a Zen master – an image of intense spiritual connection combined with ordinariness of everyday life.

In his poem “Out of the Cradle Endlessly Rocking,” writes of a life-changing childhood experience. He had been observing a nesting pair of mockingbirds for days, but one night he was drawn out of his bed by singing. The female had vanished, and the

male, seemingly in mourning, sang all night long. In his poem, Whitman would see that night as having put him on the path to being a poet. He would write:

Is it indeed toward your mate that you sing? Or is it really to me?
For I, that was a child, my tongue's use sleeping, now
I have heard you.
Now in a moment I know what I am for, I awake,
And already a thousand singers, a thousand songs, clearer,
Louder, and more sorrowful than yours,
A thousand warbling echoes have started to life within me,
never to die.

Now, in a moment, I know what I am for!

So we have come from Genesis to St. Francis, to Walt Whitman, to Darwin and Wallace, to Mary Oliver, exploring this interconnection between the human and the avian. And now I want to speak of Robert Frost, who suggests another source of sadness. Frost was born in San Francisco, but retreated to a life in the New England woods, much like Thoreau of an earlier era, and his poems reflect his rural life. One of his poems is a sonnet named for a very small, rather drab bird, "The Ovenbird." Frost wrote:

There is a singer everyone has heard,
Loud, a mid-summer and a mid-wood bird,
Who makes the solid tree trunks sound again.
He says that leaves are old and that for flowers
Mid-summer is to spring as one to ten.
He says the early petal-fall is past
When pear and cherry bloom went down in showers
On sunny days a moment overcast;
And comes that other fall we name the fall.
He says the highway dust is over all.
The bird would cease and be as other birds
But that he knows in singing not to sing.
The question that he frames in all but words
Is what to make of a diminished thing.

What to make of a diminished thing! Interestingly, this poem was written some time between 1906 and 1910, when automobiles had been around for only a few years. And yet already, Frost writes the "highway dust is over all." So the question Frost seems to be posing here, 100 years ago, is how do we relate to nature when it is gone. What do we make of a diminished thing? We have already lost many species of birds through our human activity. Can the birds help us to see what we are doing to the interdependent web, and can we find it in ourselves as a species to begin to treasure present forms of life? And does the sadness we feel when we observe birds have something to do with our sense that we are destroying our own nest?

In various ways, throughout history, people have found a spiritual connection in observing the birds of the air, the life of the skies. The title of Jonathon Rosen's book comes from D. H. Lawrence, who wrote: "Birds are the life of the skies, and when they

fly, they reveal the thoughts of the skies.” Birds are accessible to us, they are all around us. And they have the potential to reveal to us “the life of the skies.”

May we learn to be open to what the birds of the air have to teach us, about ourselves and about the world around us.

May we find -- through our connection with birds, not just the thoughts of the skies, but the wisdom of the skies.

May we learn through the birds how to feed our own souls, and how to connect with the spirit that unites us all.

And may we learn to treasure the wonder and mystery of this incredible universe we inhabit.