

Bird Watching

2/12/24

When I was a kid, my mother worked at teaching me about the natural world around us. I learned the names of wild flowers, identifying trees from their leaves and bark, and naming common birds. The tree identification by bark didn't really stick very well, but I could do the flowers and common local birds, both by sight and song.

When I moved to the Midwest, I was really confused. There were different flowers, or their local common names were different. But the worst was the song of the cardinal. I had learned to easily identify their song, but suddenly I couldn't. It turns out that cardinals have a regional song which is different in the east and the Midwest. The tune seems to shift somewhere between Ohio and Indiana. I drove my husband crazy by asking "What bird is that?" when I heard what sounded like an unfamiliar song and he would say "That's a cardinal." After fifty repetitions of this question he got a bit exasperated with me. I finally got the new song in my head. Visiting in southern Ohio a few years later, I heard a cardinal with the "proper" song and thought "Now THAT is a cardinal."

I've made it a practice to feed the birds for many years. I always provided water, but a few years ago I invested in a heated birdbath for the winter. The water attracts all kinds of birds including some that would never dream of visiting a feeder. The other day, on one of those very mild February days that felt like spring, I had a whole flock of sparrows taking turns in the water, sending up sprays of water as they joyfully frolicked in the bath.

Four or five years ago I invested in a CD of songs of Wisconsin birds. I listen to it often. After so many years, you would think that I would have the entire thing memorized, but no. For someone who is tuned into music you would think that I would have an ear for bird songs but, unfortunately, I don't. I review the CD every spring.

My youngest son, Ian, got a good introduction to birds while riding the school bus from our bluff home by Lake Wisconsin. He certainly had more chance than most youngsters to observe birds. There were turkeys roosting in the tall shrubs next to the road, right at eye level with the bus windows. This was at a time before the turkeys had invaded our cities. The DNR had apparently released turkeys at Devil's Lake State Park as part of a reintroduction effort and the birds had come across the frozen river to roost on our bluff. In addition to turkeys, Ian came home one day and informed us that he had seen 30 cranes on the way home from school. We thought he was exaggerating and drove down the hill to see. There were actually more than 60 cranes gathered in a field, getting ready to migrate.

A few years ago I gave Ian a bird feeder for his back yard and he was off and running at watching and identifying birds. I don't keep a bird list, but he does. He has found a gold mine for bird watching at the dog park out adjacent to the Ice Age trail where he walks his dog, Gryff. He got me started using the Merlin Bird ID app which had proved very helpful in identifying birds by their song. I generally can recognize birds by sight, at least the common ones, but this app has proved very helpful in identifying their songs. Maybe I'll actually get them into my ear with this reinforcement. Ian only adds birds to his list if he actually sees them. Just hearing them doesn't count! When either of us have an interesting sighting, we text it to each other. It has given us a whole new connection.

We do tend to take our "common" birds for granted. I came to this realization many years ago when I went out into the countryside with a coworker who was from Germany. She spotted a redwing blackbird and became so excited. "What is that gorgeous bird?" she inquired. I identified it for her and have never looked at them quite the same again. We do occasionally get to see an unusual bird locally. Certainly the occasional arrival of Snowy Owls is an example of this. Once, when we were living up by Lake Wisconsin, we were visited by a hummingbird with a bib which is a feathered projection on either side of the bird's neck. This is seen in some hummers in the Pacific Northwest. Try as we might, we were never able to

identify this obviously displaced bird. At the time, I left a message with the Audubon Society about our visitor but no one ever called back. I think we would have been inundated with people trying to add to their bird lifelist had the word gotten out.

Although I am not and never will be an expert on birds, learning which birds share our space has certainly proved by interesting and enriching. I plan to continue as it is an activity that can span all ages and can be continued as long as you live.