

NEW BIRDS IN THE YARD

Recent weeks have found me plying a new-found pleasure: installing bird feeders in our treeless backyard. Our most frequent visitor has been the English sparrow.

This ubiquitous bird was first introduced into the United States at Brooklyn, New York, in the early 1850s. He had but one mission: clear the trees in the parks of canker-worms. But with favorable climate and habitat, he gradually spread throughout the country and became a nuisance to many.

Thus I continue to search for the right combination of feeder and feed that will draw colorful songbirds. At best, success has been moderate.

Though I enjoyed the outdoors as a youth and invested much energy into learning the identities of trees by their leaves, I have scant recollection of birds. But occasionally an easily recognizable feather would declare the presence of a mockingbird, red-headed woodpecker or blue jay, common inhabitants in the forested regions of Lower Arkansas.

Concerning my experiences with birds since then: some have been unpleasant, others humorous.

First the unpleasant.

On a trip about 15 years ago, a whippoorwill insisted on roosting in the midst of our camp. After a couple of hours of his incessant harangue, I doubted not outdoorsman John Burroughs' report of having counted 1,088 consecutive renditions of this nocturnal creature's loud and raucous calls. It's no wonder that his species name, *vociferus*, is Latin for "voice-carrying, noisy."

Several years before that, woodpeckers drilled a two-inch hole in our wood-clad chimney in the most inaccessible upper corner. Then unbeknownst to me, grackles infiltrated the chimney through that hole and built an expansive nest on the cross-bracing about 15 feet off the ground. But since their babies couldn't fly to the access hole 10 feet above, they perished in the chimney. I had to tear off the siding and punch apart the nest with a long pole while dodging the shower of dead birds and nest remnants falling on and around me.

Now for the humorous.

In that older tree-covered neighborhood, blue jay sentinels regularly screamed with unfeigned urgency. And more often than not, a quick glance out the window revealed the cause. Old Puddy Tat would be furtively creeping along the ground, helplessly trying to avoid fearless blue dive-bombers plucking up tufts of fur on her back.

Our current neighborhood has no blue jays, so cat alarms are issued by mockingbirds (scientific name *mimus ployglottos*, meaning "mimic of many tongues"). Unlike the blue jay, mockingbirds can imitate more than 30 birdsongs. They can also mimic chirping crickets, barking dogs and squeaky hinges. But when on patrol, they scream and swoop around our aging Brudderman, clawless and belled, as if he still posed a real threat.

I once assumed that older folk took up bird watching because they had nothing better to do. Now I understand that's not true.

As I study the birds flocking our feeders, their joy in the day shames my anxieties about the future. For didn't Jesus Himself say that not even a lowly sparrow falls to the ground without the heavenly Father's notice? The birds are faithful players in the daily drama of God's provision for His creatures.