



## The View from Right Field

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Even the red-winged blackbirds, whose arrival from mid-Atlantic wintering is one of the first harbingers of spring, couldn't keep from singing out with their distinctive, raspy “kon-ka-reeee” (some bird experts say “konk-la-reee,” take your pick) last Sunday as the dawn revealed a stunning winter landscape with sunshine so bright that my photo-gray transitional bifocals turned dark. I don't speak red-winged blackbird particularly well, so maybe they were chirping, “What was I thinking leaving Maryland so early? Thirteen degrees? Fahrenheit? It was 60 on the Mason-Dixon Line last week.” But they sure sounded happy. I told them that our feeder at Right Field World Headquarters on the western fringe of the village was fully stocked with seeds from Bulldog Feed and were offered free of charge, no reservations needed. They “kon-ka-reeed” back, as if to say they preferred bugs and meadow seeds, but, hey, any port in a storm, and they had us locked into their GPS systems.

One of the wonderful things about having that single day off from my duties at The Gow School is getting to watch our bird feeders come to life in the morning. About 20 species of birds dine regularly at Right Field Avian Eats. We're an equal opportunity seedery, inviting birds of all species, colors, beak shapes, languages, feeding preference and mating orientation. We welcome the unfeathered too: squirrels, chipmunks, voles and deer to dine on the seeds I spill, accidentally on purpose, when I fill the feeders. Although uninvited, the occasional coyote will slink by, thinking he is invisible, and we don't encourage him otherwise.

No two mornings are alike, but it's not unusual for the diminutive, dapper black-capped chickadees to be first to fly in. They are the least timorous (RIP Snake) of our customers, genetically disposed, for whatever reason, to be trusting of humans. I think of them as advance scouts, or maybe, as in some monarchies or dictatorships, like food tasters for the potentate. If all goes well for the chickadees, the others will follow suit: the slender, well-mannered tree sparrows or their chubbier cousins, the house sparrow; the skittish juncos, who shelter year round in our sprawling

forsythia; the swoop-flighted goldfinch, no longer bright yellow as in summer, but in their more sophisticated olive gray winter plumage; the tufted titmice with the spiked and gelled topknot like a millennial rocker; both versions of the nuthatches—red-breasted and white breasted—whom my kids nicknamed the upside down birds for their head first approach to seed eating; the not-quite-purple- enough-to-be-a-purple-finch house finch; the triumvirate of woodpeckers—the petite downy woodpecker, the more robust hairy woodpecker and the red-bellied woodpecker, whose distinguishing feature is spot of red on his head, go figure.

A good day will bring us the prehistoric, divinely crested pileated woodpecker and the raucous, laughing flicker. The pigeon-toed mourning doves and the sweetheart pairs of cardinals prefer to breakfast on the ground, dancing with the squirrels in a non-violent routine that recalls the Keystone Kops, but seems to get everyone fed. If there are bullies in this playground, it would be the blue jays and starlings, who descend in groups (called “scolds” and “clutters,” respectively) and try to disturb the peace so they can have the place to themselves, although the chickadees will ignore them and duck in for a sunflower seed. And the bullies, no surprise, are the first to scatter at the smallest hint of trouble, even as the smaller birds stand their ground. Two players with cameo roles complete the cast of the feeder drama—the stately, senatorial crow and the Cooper’s hawk, the T-Rex figure. The crows, wise beyond their years, will behave as sentries, or better, as town criers, often not even eating, but cawing the news to the neighborhood. And the Cooper’s hawk, who fancies a songbird for breakfast will cause a mass exodus of the small birds as the first shadow of his 30-inch wingspan. With or without his quarry, Mr. Cooper will move onto greener pastures and the chickadees will return to start the feeder ballet all over again.

It’s a comforting production these wild creatures put on just outside the window. I am always amazed and encouraged by the way they jostle and spar with each other, never causing any harm and letting, at the end of the day, every bird in to have his or her fill.

If I have been wise, I will have given the unchoreographed, but still riveting drama my full attention, focusing on a system that seems to work, where birds of different feathers coexist and no one goes hungry. If I have been wise, I will have watched this ornithological opera with my computer closed and my phone far away from my elbow, where, admittedly and ashamedly, it spends most of its day. Trapped inside computer and fancy iPhone, the battles that rage on social media—mean-spirited and unproductive political rants; notices about gun rallies at a church, for Heaven’s sake; assaults on people’s character, emboldened by the remoteness of cyber space—will sit quietly and give me a minute to take in the spectacle.

Certainly, there is wonderful stuff, wonderful connections, on social media, and I’ll probably never be able to give it up. But I’ve been trying, in this last year and a half at Gow, to teach my high school English students the concept of metaphor, and I

wonder if a brief field trip to Avian Eats on the western fringe of the village might provide some insight.