

The Vintage Voice

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■ January 2009

Life at the Feeders

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In the bleak mid-winter now upon us, we look for joys to brighten the early dark of short and cold days. For me, these can sometimes be the birds which come to our backyard feeders and fountains. For years, we have taken notice of which ones come, how different their behaviors are, who is “top dog” with head-of-the-line privileges, and how the parent birds train their young to be self-sufficient.

Last winter, we left our garage door open for the sunny part of the day, then closed it as night drew near. Some days later, as I passed a row of gardening and cleaning implements hung on one wall, I noticed that the dust mop, which is shaped out on each side of the handle a foot or so, had a visitor in the middle of these warm, fluffy arms. A little wren’s tail was barely visible if you knew where to look, and as I passed, I smiled to see how inventive she was, and I let her be. She was there almost every cold night, if we remembered to leave the garage open during the day. In the morning, she would fly out for breakfast and perhaps her morning ablutions in the bird bath. Sometime in the afternoon, she would return and snuggle down into her warm bed.

One day, I went into the garage to get something out of the refrigerator we keep there, and left the house door open. Sometime later, I looked into the bedroom and saw a tiny bird flapping against the window. My presence must have scared her and she flew into the kitchen. I shut the bedroom door and any others I could, then called Charles to the rescue. He got down on his knees and slowly crawled to where she was quite still on the floor in a corner, under a chair. Talking to her the whole time in a gentle voice, he made a grab for her — and missed. She jumped a foot and gave a big “Cheep!” She landed in the same spot, but this time had her back to him. Using the same technique, he approached her again and this time was successful in catching her. She did not seem afraid, although she did utter the same “Cheep!” just not as loud this time. He carefully took her to the back door and let her go, whereupon she headed for the garage door again. She continued to use her little bed throughout the winter. We have noticed that wrens are good housekeepers, and perhaps she thought her busy cleaning-out of the feeder tray was payment for her shelter.

With heating costs much higher this winter, we have not left the garage door open as often, and our little wren has had to find other accommodations. She may be the one who comes on the deck to check out all the potted plants struggling to live through the cold, and sometimes to hide under the grill cover. Wherever she is, I hope she is as warm and toasty as she was last winter.

If wrens are housekeepers, woodpeckers are dictators. They tell all the other birds when space must be cleared for their needs to be met. We have two or three red-headed woodpeckers,

and no other bird can be at the feeders when they wish to come. A red-bellied woodpecker is another frequent visitor, and his ranking is only just below that of the redheads. He will run off every other bird, but the redhead has top priority even though he is slightly smaller of stature. Doves have invaded us, and if they were not so gentle, a coup would have happened long ago. Instead, they defer to all others, just walking around, pretending to be taking a stroll, until they notice that the field is clear to ascend to the feeders.

Now, feeding and watering in our backyard are fine for doves. No problem. Just don't let me catch them nesting on top of the columns on our front porch. There is just enough space there for a nest, and even though we have put plastic pots to fill the space, they manage every year to squirm their way behind the pots and hatch their broods. A friend puts wine bottles on top of his columns, but I fear they would just knock them to the floor, leaving me a mess of glass to clean up. It keeps me busy trying to think of something which would work to keep them away. I have a play snake I have thought of using. Would that work?

The most interesting, annoying, and amazing animal mooching off the plentiful seeds in our three feeders is the squirrel. Oh, the things that could be said of squirrels!

Fortunately, my grandmother taught me that those words are used only when a person has too little intelligence to think of more acceptable vocabulary. They are the smartest, most infuriating animals I know!

At least one of ours has finally given up trying to climb the pole with an upside down funnel protecting the two long feeders that the small birds favor. He has figured out a way to climb a pine tree and eat out of the third feeder, whose ledge closes when a certain weight sits on it. His weight! He hangs down by his back legs at the top of the glass covering tantalizing sunflower seeds, reaches one front paw under the glass to hold it open, and uses the other to lift those delicious seeds to his mouth. He can empty that feeder in a day, and going outside and urging him (in a very loud voice) to "Get away from there!" does not work at all. He looks at you as if you were demented and calmly continues to chew. What can you do? As long as he does not eat the day lilies just beginning to poke out of the chilly ground, anticipating spring, I guess we will let him eat, as we secretly admire his cunning and his gall.

Many are the birds we get — house finches dipped in raspberry juice, American goldfinches, rufous-sided towhees, mockingbirds, sparrows, titmice, chickadees, an occasional bluebird, a rose-breasted grosbeak, brown thrashers, robins, a prothonotary warbler once, and many others.

Watching them is fascinating, feeding them is constant, and enjoying them as God's creatures is a pleasure. (Except for the squirrels!)



Nancy R. Duvall lives in Columbia, SC with her husband, Charles, retired Bishop of the Diocese of the Central Gulf Coast. She is ending a term on the vestry at St. John's Church, Shannon, in Columbia, and has found it to be a completely different look at the church than that of a priest's or bishop's wife.