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It Nourishes You

Her eyelids flutter a moment, and then fade. Her svelte body shudders to the metronome rhythm of respiration, involuntary respiration, each breath quick and shallow and steady: inhale, exhale... expand, contract...inhale, exhale... Again her eyes flicker, sticky eyelids, reluctant to part, peeling open, blinking, blinking, and then slowly closing. Inhale, exhale...expand, contract...inhale, exhale...

It's a sunny and cool December morning in Oklahoma, and a Bewick's wren is calling from the edge of the woods. A tufted titmouse flutters through the limbs of an ash tree as a pair of Carolina chickadees, dropping from branch to branch like feathered raindrops, descend onto the feeder in my backyard, which is brimming with sunflower seeds. Nearby, and indifferent to these seeds, a downy woodpecker hammers its way along the limb of a blackjack oak, its steady percussive song the sound of confidence, independence. The morning is calm, and the few leaves remaining on the trees cling precariously to the glories of the rapidly departing year. In the meadow across the creek, the bluestem and switchgrass gleam in the rising sun, awaiting the white-tailed deer soon to come bounding through, or a tawny bobcat skulking the creek banks, long-legged and lithe, and silent, as it hunts for a rabbit or a bird, like the little goldfinch on the ground before me.

She's blinking again. Eyelids as delicate as wildflower petals part reluctantly, briefly, and then close as she fades back into her dazed dream. Now two tiny feathers flutter softly to the ground like yellow snowflakes, having lost their sticky purchase on the plate-glass window with which my little golden girl has just collided. Behind me, I hear the birds scratching through the seeds in the feeder, and flying away. Without turning to look, I picture the scene: perched on the ash limb nearby, each bird waiting its turn to drop onto the feeder, and then descending, one by one by one, the cardinals eating in, the chickadees and titmice and juncos taking their meals to go. Some of the birds scratch out a good bit of the seed, which is soon claimed by others on the ground. Whenever this happens, I wonder who's feeding whom.

Now her dark eyes remain open for several seconds, shining in the soft morning light, revealing the delicate but resilient life within. Her breathing, still quick and steady, her posture stable, I hesitate to pick her up and decide instead to just sit and watch her regain her faculties, knowing that, while my house and its glass windows may be

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impeding the birds' flight paths to some extent, at least I'm protecting her from the sharp-shinned hawks that swoop in suddenly from time to time, the prowling bobcats along the creek, and certainly the free-roaming house cats which claim between one and three billion birds in the United States each year, according to a recent article in *Smithsonian*. The thought is dizzying.

Sometimes I think it might be preferable to remove the feeders in my backyard and allow the birds to fend for themselves, although I prefer to believe they're benefitting from the suet and sunflower seeds I provide them during the lean winter months. Yet, as I sit here watching the little golden girl slowly come to her senses, I have my doubts. And I wonder: Am I doing this for the birds, or my own enjoyment? The answer, of course, is "both." But why should one—in this case, the feeding—detract from the other, or worse, prove in any way detrimental to the birds? To my way of thinking, it shouldn't. That's certainly not my intent. Nor is it, I imagine, the intent of any of the fifty-two million Americans who feed birds and other wildlife around their homes. But the American Goldfinch on the ground before me suggests otherwise, and this is what I'm struggling with. How do we benefit our wild neighbors without adversely impacting them through the very same actions, however benevolent in spirit? How do we benefit the natural world that so enriches our lives, and which we're part of, without simultaneously damaging it? How unobtrusive must I make myself, how insignificant must my presence on this earth be, simply to have a *neutral* effect? Is this even possible? The probability that it's not is troubling, disorienting. I rub my forehead in an attempt to ward off the migraine I feel coming on.

A 2015 report from the *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences* detailed a study in which researchers in New Zealand spent eighteen months analyzing the effects of supplemental feeding on urban bird communities. Using monthly bird surveys to determine avian community composition and species density at twenty-three residential properties, including both feeding and non-feeding stations, the researchers found that bird populations diverged in those locations where supplemental feeding occurred. More importantly, they found that such feeding tended to benefit non-native species—in this case, the house sparrow and spotted dove—while having a negative effect on native insectivores, such as the grey warbler. Though research indicates that these imbalances tend to desist once supplemental feeding ceases, it nevertheless reveals that feeding contributes substantially to the structure of urban bird communities, potentially altering the balance between native and non-native species.

Why is this of concern? Ask any ecologist and he or she will tell you that invasive species, whether plant, mammal, fish, or bird,

gradually displace native flora and fauna. Eventually, this unnatural displacement is multiplied across the food chain and its effects felt throughout all levels of the ecosystem.

Curious about the larger ecological implications of bird feeding, particularly that resulting from species imbalance, I contacted the lead researcher of the study, Josie Galbraith, a biologist at the University of Auckland, in New Zealand. Josie told me that because most studies to date have been conducted in very specific areas, on limited scales, drawing conclusions about larger impacts is difficult. She pointed out, however, that the homogenization of urban bird communities brought about through supplemental feeding could have other, secondary effects. “If pollinating birds are losing out, and are displaced by other non-pollinators, then there could be an impact on regeneration of plants and trees,” she told me. “This doesn’t have to be a native [versus] non-native issue though. It could occur within communities of purely native birds too.”

Which could, once again, lead to an unnatural species imbalance, potentially affecting the larger ecosystem. Given this, one can imagine a scenario in which mosquito-eating birds, for instance, could be displaced by non-insectivores, which could result in the proliferation of these disease-carrying insects. This could potentially have consequences for human health, especially in those cases where such imbalances occur across large regions, and for extended periods of time. In light of this, one wonders about the current Zika outbreak in south Florida (and elsewhere in Latin America and the Caribbean). Scientists tell us that the *Aedes aegypti* mosquito, the vector for the Zika virus, is an urban insect that lives in close proximity to human habitations, thriving in our garbage, breeding in our bird baths and the water bowls we set out for pets, even living inside our own homes. But beyond this, what other factors are contributing to its proliferation? Is it simply an abundance of habitat? Or has the *Aedes aegypti* mosquito somehow benefitted from a lack of predation resulting from a similar imbalance of insect-eating bird species in these areas, one brought about through human activity such as habitat destruction, urban or suburban development, or perhaps something as innocuous as bird feeding?

There is simply not enough evidence to answer these questions at this point.

In the meantime, I resolve to continue feeding the birds because I want to believe that despite the occasional mishap, despite whatever detrimental effects occur from time to time, my efforts—and those of kindred spirits all across the world—are ultimately benefitting them. Food is scarce during winter, and in supplementing their diets we’re helping them through these difficult months, even as they

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nourish us through the color and life they lend to an otherwise bleak off-season landscape. One suspects—and I'm sure many birdwatchers would agree—that the psychological and spiritual sustenance we derive from feeding birds is equivalent to the physical benefits birds receive from the suet and seeds we provide. And in this sense our relationship is symbiotic.

Perhaps we're also contributing to the greater good, to something more significant and enduring than our own small lives, something we can't quite quantify, but which we feel in our hearts and minds.

Growing up, my brothers and I spent a lot of time with our maternal grandmother. She had lived through the Great Depression. The hardships she'd experienced weren't often mentioned, but they manifested themselves in a number of ways, such as the leftover food she saved, the pantry of non-perishables she maintained, her fruit trees and vegetable garden, the products of which she canned and collected on her cellar's shelves. Perhaps most indicative of her experiences, as well as the considerable value she placed on food, was her compassion for the hungry and a willingness to share with and feed anyone in need. My grandmother helped me understand in no uncertain terms that the meaning of wealth, and that sense we know as "security," had nothing to do with money, large homes or new cars. Rather, it had everything to do with food—being able to feed yourself, having enough to eat. If one is hungry, I realized, then everything becomes subservient to that hunger, and nothing else really matters. On the other hand, when our hunger is appeased we're free to engage the larger world, free to pursue our lives and dreams. This makes anything possible.

While these lessons came early in life, eventually I grew to realize that food is something more than simple fuel to carry us through the day. Eating not only satisfies our appetites, providing the nourishment necessary to sustain us, it also feeds our minds and souls. Foods' flavors and textures and aromas, and their many associated pleasures, are part of the joy of being human. Playwright George Bernard Shaw famously said that there is no love sincerer than the love of food—an observation that recognizes both the physical necessity of eating and, perhaps equally, the emotional sustenance we derive from the same. Among other things, the foods we eat tell us who we are, where we come from, and something about the world we live in. Eating, then, is a way of identification. It's also a means of connecting with others. I'm reminded of this every time my wife and I prepare dinner using one of my grandmother's old recipes. Eating a piece of pumpkin pie, for example, made with her delectable crust, is essentially to go back in time. The flavors trigger the picture show in my mind, and as I eat I'm instantly transported decades into the past,

to my grandmother's kitchen, where I sit at her table, warm and secure, relishing those very same flavors.

In his book, *The Physiology of Taste*, Jean Anthelme Brillat-Savarin spoke to food's timeless and enduring charms, noting, "The pleasure of the table belongs to all ages, to all conditions, to all countries, and to all æras; it mingles with all other pleasures, and remains at last to console us for their departure."

But if the foods we eat tell us who we are, then what can be said of that which we provide to others? What does this reveal about us?

In sharing food, in feeding the hungry, even on the smallest and simplest of terms, my grandmother introduced me to the concept of *noblesse oblige*, which, though seldom mentioned today, has endured through the years, less a product of tradition, I believe, than one stemming from our abiding moral compass. Deep down in all of us there is a desire to assist, to care, to nurture others, even other species. These traditions are as old as humanity. It's part of who we are. Emily Dickinson spoke to this compulsion in her poem "Not in Vain": "If I can stop one heart from breaking / I shall not live in vain: / If I can ease one life the aching / Or cool one pain / Or help one fainting robin / Unto his nest again / I shall not live in vain."

Whenever I watch the cardinals and chickadees gathering around my backyard feeders, sometimes I can still see my grandmother preparing a sandwich for a drifter, breaking up slices of bread and tossing these pieces to the robins in her yard, or placing a pan of leftovers on her back porch for the stray dog that had wandered up to her house. Food was offered not in pity, but out of respect, compassion, and an understanding that life can be so hard, that we're all going through this big world together, and that it's our duty to care enough to share, to help those in need, every living thing.

Of course, I derive no small amount of pleasure from feeding the birds around my house, and in being thus attuned to my local bird communities, I'm more involved and invested in their welfare, as well as that of the larger ecosystem. After all, observing nature, immersing ourselves in it, and learning about it are the first steps toward protecting it. And if we can do this, we will have not lived in vain.

Ask any hundred bird watchers why they do what they do, and you're likely to receive as many different responses. I am reminded of one particular retort to this recurring question, which appeared in the form of an April 2002 article in *The Christian Science Monitor*. The author of the article, Robert Winkler, notes that those of us who watch birds do so for one simple reason: because they're here. "Yes, they control insects," he writes, "but their benefit to humanity is no more

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the measure of their worth than the pharmacy shelf is the measure of the tropical rain forest. Wildlife has a right to exist for its own sake.”

My spirits were buoyed by this observation, as well as Winkler’s assessment that the real fascination in watching birds stems from the freedom and wildness they embody, about which humans can only dream. “I think we envy the birds’ wild freedom,” he writes. “We want that freedom and wildness for ourselves. And so we birders watch, listen to, identify, count, list, house, feed, and photograph birds.”

A plausible explanation, certainly, for this is precisely the reason so many of us watch sports. Most people lack the athletic prowess that could place us in league with high-level sports figures. For this reason we’re often enthralled by those who possess such gifts, the ability to run, throw, dive, lean, and leap beyond the boundaries that bind most of us to less dramatic lives. But even the most common birds possess gifts, and freedoms, that are simply unattainable to humans.

Such freedom was never more beautifully displayed than last summer, as I undertook a close study of the Mississippi kites in my area. Each day I would watch these beautiful raptors soar through the bright blue Oklahoma skies, catching cicadas, dragonflies, and grasshoppers, which the adults would then deliver to their nests to feed their rapidly growing young. Sometimes this occurred with a gentle, low-altitude glide into the nest. Other times, the adult kites would fold their wings and descend suddenly from three or four hundred feet in the sky, angling sharply and at high speeds, only to expand their wings at the final moment, land deftly on the edge of their nests, deliver the morsel, and take to the skies once again in the kind of ceaseless and seemingly thankless pursuit that only a parent can know. In all cases, when a fledging would spot its parent arriving with food, whether from thirty or three hundred feet away, its call would change from a sporadic cry into a steady, high-pitched whine like that of a puppy, which abated only after the adult’s arrival to the nest. Six months later, though the kites have all left for the year, I can still hear these fledglings calling in excitement at the sight of their elegant and graceful parents bringing food, nourishment, security. Thinking back forty years, I remember exactly how that feels.

She tilts her gaze to the left, now to the right, her brown eyes clear and bright. Now she turns her head. Does she see me? Do I frighten her? Or does she somehow understand that my presence, my intentions, are purely altruistic? Her breathing remains steady, quick and even and steady. I admire her soft downy head, her golden-yellow throat, the way her jutting tail feathers terminate in a neatly

symmetrical fork—a form and function that humans can strive to replicate, but in my opinion never duplicate, never surpass or improve upon. Mother Nature is perfect the way she is, and that's the beauty in all this. And also the tragedy. As a global society, we must commit ourselves fully and wholeheartedly to protecting and preserving the natural world, not just because it's sublime, not only because it brings beauty and joy and meaning to our lives, but because it's irreplaceable.

Yesterday morning while driving home after taking my son to school, I had just passed a deer crossing sign the city had erected, warning drivers to pay heed, when a red-tailed hawk dropped from a tree and glided low over the road directly in front of me, maintaining this dramatic but dangerous low-altitude trajectory until reaching a tree in a field across the roadway, at which point it swooped up to a perch on a dead branch. It was a beautiful sight, and for a few precious seconds I flew vicariously with the hawk, possessing a bird's eye view of the road and adjoining field. I could almost feel the hawk's focus as it glided so smoothly and effortlessly through the air in front of me. The encounter might have been very different, however, had I come along just a moment sooner, or had I been driving, as so many motorists in this area do, much more quickly. It reminded me of the narrow margins in which we live our lives. It reminded me too of Chief Seattle, the ancient leader of the Duwamish and Suquamish tribes, who once observed that if all the beasts disappeared from the earth, man would die of a great loneliness of the spirit, for all life is connected. In watching the hawk sail across the roadway in front of me, in feeding the birds around my house, I understand what he was saying.

The birds are alighting on the feeder behind me, snatching sunflower seeds, flying away to crack them open. The breeze rustles the leaves in the trees and suddenly my little golden girl snaps to life. She darts away, porpoising through the air toward a nearby oak, where she alights, animated and vivacious as she skitters along the limb, surveying her surroundings. Then she spins and falls away from the tree as she descends on the feeder, where it's my hope she'll find something nourishing enough to continue to call my backyard home, at least through the winter.

