

The Saving Grace of Birds

Written by Margaret Evans, Editor



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Early in the springtime of 2020, the birds abandoned me. Just when I



needed them most, they simply disappeared from my world.

It was weird. We'd managed to get our daughter home from Central Europe – that drama had passed – and the days were growing long and lovely. We had plenty of time now to sit outside together, and I was desperate to watch some birds. But suddenly there were no birds to watch.

I couldn't figure it out. My feeders were clean, full of seed and suet. I'd added a birdbath to my set-up, which somebody'd said was a 'must' if I hoped to attract buntings of any kind. (The Painted Bunting has long been my holy grail, but I'm eager for Indigos, too.) On top of all that, it was spring!

The disappearing act was especially confusing since winter had been so bountiful for this backyard birder. Soon after Christmas, a bird appeared in my yard that I'd never even *seen* before, except in a dream. In early January, I wrote on Facebook:

□ □ Last night's dream was a doozy. I was at an outdoor party with friends when a Baltimore Oriole flew into our midst – dazzling orange and black, a rare sight in these parts – and landed in my hand. It took me by surprise – the bird seemed shocked, too, and was tangled in my fingers at first – but as I tried to free him, he seemed reticent to leave. I stood up and gently walked outside the circle of friends, the bird lingering in my palm as I barely dared to breathe. Quietly – I didn't want to scare him off – I whispered, "Somebody come take a picture of this, please!" My friends were all chattering away at the party, and nobody heard me. So I tiptoed back toward the group, picked up my phone with my spare hand, and just as I was about to take the picture myself, a priest appeared and said, "Let me." Now, this was no priest I knew . . . □ no priest I'd ever seen. He was very old, swathed in black, flowing robes, wearing a tall black miter-esque hat. I thanked him and handed him my phone, and he began snapping away – very close to the bird. "Would you mind standing back a little?" I asked. "I want it to be very clear that I actually HELD a Baltimore Oriole!" And so he did.□

□ □ After the photo shoot, I stepped back outside the party to let the bird go. This time, he readily flew from my hand. I went back and picked up my phone to look at the pictures, still basking in the magic of the moment, excited to share it with my FB friends. But there WERE no pictures. Not any new ones, anyway. Just the photos I'd taken of my family a week ago, on Christmas Day.

The day after I shared this dream – I kid you not! – a *real* Baltimore Oriole appeared on my orange suet feeder and hung around our yard for about six weeks. Not only was it was my “dream bird,” it was possibly the most spectacular creature ever to grace my presence. Keeping it company were the usual Cardinals and House Finches, Chickadees and Tufted Titmice, all manner of woodpecker and – another exciting newbie to my yard – a Yellow-throated Warbler. I was in bird heaven.

And then suddenly, in late March, they were all gone. Vanished. I figured the Oriole and the Warbler had moved on in their migration, but where were my regulars? Where were the permanent residents that made my yard a place of daily wonder and contemplation?

I posed this question to some of my birder friends – online, of course – and most seemed

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stumped, though a couple of ideas were bandied about. “Maybe, with everybody staying home now, more folks are feeding birds so you’ve got more competition in your neighborhood,” posited one friend. Hmmm... That made sense. Another said, “It’s spring, and there’s lots of ‘free food’ out there now, so maybe your birds have gone elsewhere – bushes, trees, etc. – for their regular meals.” This also seemed plausible.

Still, I was bereft. Understanding a phenomenon doesn’t always make it easier to accept. I missed my birds. Especially now. With no more choir practice and no more church, birding felt like my last remaining sacrament – a portal to prayer, a gateway to the mystical – and now that, too, was gone.

If you think I’m exaggerating, you’re probably not a birder. Then again, as with religion, everybody’s birding experience is different. For me, birding is kind of like a fairy tale for grown ups... a mystery you never quite solve. Yes, it’s scientific – there are many things you can do in your yard to help attract birds – but in the end, it’s more like magic than science. In the end, it’s up to the birds. They either show up or they don’t, and I’m never sure why.

It seems there’s an element of grace involved.

A year ago, on April 26, 2019, my father died unexpectedly. After receiving the news from my sister in Charleston, and speaking with my mom in Alabama, I sat in my backyard in a kind of shocked stupor. I remember the perfect spring morning vividly, its insistent beauty that seemed to mock me as I struggled to process the bleak notion of a Dadless world. Suddenly, something flashed at the corner of my eye and I turned to see the most radiant Eastern Bluebird at one of my feeders. Until that morning, bluebirds had eluded me – I’d see the occasional bright speck on a power line, or darting from one treetop to another – but this one was right in front of me, and it was stunning.

I slowly lifted my phone and began snapping pictures. Miraculously, the bluebird stayed put. To call our photo shoot “therapeutic” would be a failure of language, a desecration of something sacred, but I’m not sure how else to describe it. By the time the bird left me, my banked tears were flowing. It dawned on me that Dad’s favorite color was blue, and when I shared the story later, a friend reminded me that the Blue Angels had been in town that day. Blue Angels.

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Make of that story what you will. Surely there is science in it. I'd hung a bluebird box in a tree five years earlier, and maybe they were bound to show up eventually. When I returned from my dad's funeral in Alabama, there were several bluebirds hanging around the yard – a whole family – and they buoyed my spirits through the spring and summer in a way I can't begin to explain. There is no language for it. It's a mystery.

Speaking of which . . . the good news, dear reader, is that my birds have come back. After a month-long hiatus – for whatever reason – they are once again filling my yard and my heart. The Red-bellied woodpeckers have babies, and the Cardinals have multiplied, too. And for the first year ever, a large contingent of Cedar Waxwings are visiting our mulberry tree on the regular. They disappear in a flurry the moment I come near, but even the sound of their beating wings thrills me. It's the sound of something ancient and something entirely new.

Last week, I welcomed my first hummingbird of the season, and a couple of wrens have built a nest in the hanging plant by the door. No bluebirds yet, but the spring is young. My eternal quest for the Painted Bunting continues; the birdbath awaits, but who knows if it will work? With birds, if you build it they will come – or not.

But maybe another iconic film – shot right here in the Lowcountry – says it better. Birding is like a box of chocolates. You never know what you're going to get.

And that's all I have to say about that.