

# BIRDS

When they come to visit me, all of my family seem to enjoy watching the birds. This is probably due to the influence of Lee and I. Lee loved watching and talking about the birds, and I loved to capture them with my camera.

Lee and I always enjoyed the birds but watching and feeding them became a major pastime. Years ago Lee started throwing whole grain milo on the ground by the windbreak to feed the quail. Then we added thistle seed feeders for the golden finches and sunflower seeds feeders which were used by all the birds. These were placed at the edge of my flower garden along the sidewalk and just outside the dining room windows.

It was a perfect place to have the bird feeders. We have windows along the north side of our dining room. As we always ate our meals at the dining room table, we would watch the birds three times a day--morning, noon, and night. Lee even rigged up a platform feeder which he placed in my window box just outside the center north dining room window. What fun to have the birds fly in and feed just three feet or even closer from where we were eating our meal. To my surprise, one evening a raccoon came up to the bird feeder by the window and had a hearty meal. I was about one foot away but on the house side of the window. I did not stop him from enjoying his meal.

A cute animal and one that is fun to watch but unwelcome at the bird feeders is the squirrel. Squirrels like to get in the bird feeders day and night. They scare the birds away and consume a lot of the bird feed, so I keep trying different ways to keep them out of feeders. It is a continuing problem.

The dining room and kitchen were the center of many of the family activities in the house. So throughout the day we would often catch sight of the birds as they flew in to feed. If possible Lee and I would stop our tasks and enjoy the birds. What an entertaining break they were.

Lee saw a sign he decided to modify and make. He placed this sign just outside the house by the feeders. It said, "Winter is for the birds." And for us that was true because watching the birds was one of our favorite winter activities. The slate-colored junco was always present if there was snow or a snowstorm was on the way.

We used to think the gold finches left during the colder months, but they didn't. They just lost the bright yellow color which changed to a tan. It's neat seeing them start turning yellow again in the spring.

We enjoyed the cardinals all year. The bright red male with black throat is an eye catcher and the female is a yellow brown with streaks of red in the wings and tail. She is also pretty.

They are beautiful whether in the cedars or on the snow. I loved trying to capture their beauty with my camera from the dining room window.

It's great to hear the bob whites (quails) with their crisp little call that sounds like their names. I would whistle back to them. Lee was very good at imitating their call. We both loved listening to and watching these birds. For several years during the winter months and especially if it snowed. Lee would put some milo out by the cedars so we could watch the quail come in to feed. It was one of the reasons we so enjoyed living in the country.

Late February and early March were thrilling times as we watched the summer birds returning. The robins were among the first to arrive and hop around everywhere picking at the ground for worms and insects. The turtle doves, even though they usually have their nests close to the ground, would come to the feeders. The bluejays are definitely a very pretty bird but are guilty of robbing nests. Besides they are bullies to the other birds.

I love to get up in the spring and go outside in the morning where you can hear the birds. The mockingbirds are my favorites with their many songs. I call them "mockers." One mockingbird seemed to prefer producing his many calls from a special tree limb out front close to my large cactus plant by the driftwood log. The hummingbirds, another of my favorite birds, start showing up in May. I love watching the "hummers" feeding on the flowers in my flowerbed.

In the spring the bluebirds come back. Lee made several bluebird birdhouses and put them on posts down the driveway and east of the house in an effort to attract these beautiful birds. I do not think they used the birdhouses much, but they did come around more often. They do not come to the feeders but enjoy the bird bath. They hop in and dip. Hop out and shake. Then they jump back in again.

The different kinds of wood peckers would take the sunflower and milo seed to store in a crevice somewhere. After a while it was no longer a surprise to find seeds in unusual locations.

For years, the barn swallows built their nests of mud and grass above the dining room window on the front porch. They are a pretty bird and watching the newly hatched fledglings develop and take their first flying lessons was fascinating. The only problem with having them nest on the front porch was the mess their droppings made. Lee's inventive mind came up with a solution. He built a small, removable shelf to catch the mess. It worked pretty well. Eventually we prevented the barn swallows from nesting on the porch so now they nest along the edges of the carport. The carport is wide enough so that the "bird dilly" doesn't usually get on the cars and the rain sometimes helps clean up the mess. Barn swallows do not come to the feeders as they feed on flying insects so they help keep them under control. Swallows are fun to watch flying because they are fast and dart around.

Some of the birds didn't regularly come close to the house but preferred staying in the trees beyond the windbreak or out in the sheds north of the windbreak. Lee even liked to watch the crows that would perch at the top of a dead tree. The pigeons preferred staying down in the hayshed. Meadowlarks were plentiful in the pastures, and often we would spot a scissortail. Occasionally we would spot different types of owls. I will never forget a large owl we had one year. One evening as it started to get dark, I was outside when one dove down at me. It did not touch me, but it was too close for comfort.

We often have the wild Canadian geese flying over and honking as they fly. In the spring we normally have a pair at our east pond. It is fun to watch them. I love watching the goslings following their parents. Lee and I enjoyed watching the antics of the geese as they tried to draw our attention away from their nest. During the past few years, our large lab mix dog seemed to think it was his responsibility to bring the geese eggs from the pond nest to our back door. It is amazing that he would carry them unbroken in his mouth all that way to the house. If he saw a gosling, he pounced and it was a goner.

The ponds had their own groups of birds. During the years when we had lots of cattails at the pond, the redwing blackbirds were prevalent. Sometime a blue heron would appear.

Of course we always had different kinds of sparrows and blackbirds. Lee could identify most of the birds because he had a bird identification book he would consult.

As long as he was able, Lee feed and watered the birds. Now I do my best to keep fresh water and filled feeders for the birds.

Yes I am very allergic to feathers, but that does not stop me from watching and enjoying the birds in the outdoors. It is a pastime Lee and I enjoyed over the years. The one thing Lee continued to really enjoy in his last days was watching the birds.

--As told by **Muriel Mae (Willhite) Whiteside** to Sandra Taylor