

Laurie Walters
July 29th, 2010

Back Yard Antics

Something round and hard hits my arm with surprising force. I look around and there is no one there other than the birds and the... squirrels? Ah ha! Where is that little bugger? I begin to search the tree branches above, half expecting to see a squirrel dressed in camo hurling acorns at me. Instead I see a small flock of grackles devouring cherries from the branches high above, flinging the un-ripened fruit to the ground.

My intention was to go unnoticed that morning in my backyard wildlife habitat. I sat there for three hours making only small movements and keeping quiet. Perhaps it was the bright yellow beach towel or the lime green lawn chair, but that morning I earned the attention of more than one backyard critter.

A yellow missile soars in from my right, barely missing my head. It comes to a rest on the thistle feeder and explodes into a boisterous tune. The goldfinch looks directly at me. What a miraculous creature. His vibrant yellow feathers are accented by a black cap and black and white striped wings. He extracts long seeds of thistle from the tiny holes of the feeder. An expert in his technique.

A weathered metal peanut feeder is fastened to an oak tree. Solid and steady; despite its rusted flaws. A cautious squirrel sneaks down the backside of the tree. Soundless until the feeder's lid snaps closed. Once he has his nutty prize he spirals up the tree to munch undercover.

There is a rustle in the branches of the dogwood to my right. A young finch becomes the star of my attention. Her body is covered with fluffy brown feathers. As she sits watching me, she tilts her head. Her little black eyes are shining as she begins to chatter. She hops to a closer branch to close the gap between us; as if the distance were the cause for our communication barrier. Mesmerized by this brave

little creature, I slowly grab my camera. The moment I am ready to snap a picture, she darts off to a neighboring tree. Her mother is waiting there for her and for now, I am being watched from a distance.

From the corner of my eye I catch sight of a peanut shell as it falls to the ground. Right behind it follows the squirrel. With increasing confidence he sprints down the front of the tree scurrying onto the lowest branch. Our eyes meet. Without hesitation, he scampers down to the feeder and swipes another nut. The lid slams shut as he scrambles on top of it. He raises the peanut and rants before tearing into his prize. The white hairs of his bushy tail stand out like the quills of a porcupine. The squirrel yells at me again before rushing up the tree.

Confused by his anger, I lose myself in the sights around me. My eyes focus on the smooth barkless tree in the back corner of my tiny suburban lot. The morning rays of the sun filter through the neighbor's trees highlighting a wooden face composed of knots. The eerie mouth calls to me. My concentration is broken when a menacing *woosh* echoes through the yard. A giant turkey buzzard silhouettes against the cloudless sky. Its shadow circling the ground like a target with me as the center. I hear another set of wings, and then another. Three buzzards land on the tree. Its leafless branches bending from their massive size. They spread their wings absorbing the sun's warmth. I shiver and reposition my makeshift blanket. One-by-one five more buzzards find their way to the dead tree. They all sit and stare. Watching me. Waiting.

Just as I am about to retreat inside, a flurry of activity fills the yard. Breakfast-time has arrived. Six finches swarm the corn feeder. The birds flap their wings and chirp, plunging themselves into the cups of corn. Yellow kernels rain down to the hungry mourning doves below. To my left, the chain link fence is now covered with hungry bystanders. When a spot opens on a finch feeder someone up front swoops in and the others shuffle on down the line. Scattered on the ground beneath a crepe myrtle lays a handful of cracked corn. A male and female house finch take turns snatching the small kernels, before rushing back to the safety of the blooming branches.

Amidst all the excitement, my neighbor's backdoor opens. She greets me with a look of surprise as she rushes off to work, oblivious to the commotion around her. As her car engine fades into the drone of the traffic, I am transported back by the insistent chattering of my young feathered friend. Joy squeezes my heart knowing she's returned. In the distance, I see her father watching us. He's as protective as a human father.

She moves about in an erratic pattern ultimately jumping closer and closer to me. I take a second shot at snapping a picture -only to fail again. Off she flies to the chain-link fence where her mom has been filling up on thistle. Upon arrival she hops around fluttering her wings, screaming like a two-year-old in the middle of the world's biggest temper tantrum. Mom shoves her beak full of food, bringing the temper tantrum to an immediate end. Upon finishing she hurries back. With two quick movements she wipes her beak against a branch only to continue our one-sided conversation.

While she prattles on, the fast approaching rays of the sun showcase the yard. I hesitantly pull the beach towel from my feet, and sigh as the warmth penetrates my bare toes. The drops of dew on the lawn shimmer like prismatic crystal balls foretelling the warm summer day that lies ahead.

A quick movement from the dogwood brings my attention back to the young finch. She is perched only an arm's length away. I reach again for my camera and instead of flying away, she hides in the leaves. By now, I am totally engaged in this game of hide-and-seek. Determined to win, I chase her through the tree with my digital lens. It isn't until several frustrated pictures later that I concede. As if sensing my defeat, she lands on the closest branch. The rumble of my stomach fills the silence between us and she tilts her head. I can't help but laugh at this remarkable little creature.

Although endless hours could be spent in my backyard sanctuary, I am reminded again that my own breakfast awaits. As I bundle my camera and writing supplies in the towel, I search the landscape for the squirrel. After our earlier encounter, I am left feeling unresolved. To my amusement, he is perched in the corn feeder sharing the colorful space with some late-arrivers. After acknowledging me

with a quick stare, he continues to enjoy his drawn out breakfast. With a shrug I open the backdoor. As I enter the house, the cold air-conditioning slaps my skin bringing me back to reality.