

## PLANTING A NEW HOBBY, OUTLOOK ON LIFE



As my wife and I left our wedding reception twenty-two years ago, guests showered us with birdseed in a gesture of good luck.

The good luck didn't seem to arrive right away.

Within hours of starting our honeymoon, we both fell ill with a stomach bug, forcing us to cut the trip short. We staggered home and spent the rest of the week sharing a sickbed, which gave us plenty of time to consider how quickly the for-better-or-worse clause of our marital contract had kicked in.

At some point, I padded to the kitchen for clear broth and found a few bags of birdseed in the corner — reception leftovers my mother-in-law had brought over. Having no interest in birds, I couldn't think of anything I wanted less. I was halfway to the garbage can with the bags when guilt got the better of me. Since it seemed a shame to discard the delivery, I brought the plastic sacks outside, slit them open, and lined the top of the waist-high garden wall with the contents.

As my meager meal steamed on the stove, two cardinals arrived to sample the seed. Seeing them moved me in a way I didn't expect. Throughout the ages, people have looked to birds as bearers of tidings, whether it be the dove promising better times in the

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biblical story of Noah, or the raven that carries a darker message in the famous poem by Edgar Allan Poe.

The cardinals suggested the turning of a chapter, a hint of happier days ahead. Once fully recovered, I continued to watch the window for birds — persuaded, on some level, that they might have more news to share. When the leftover seed disappeared, I bought more. Field guides followed, then birdfeeders, birdbaths, binoculars. Improbably, I had become a birdwatcher.

If I had to summarize the news of nature that birds have brought me since then, I'd probably point to the abiding theme of movement, of migration.

Many birds, like cardinals and chickadees, mourning doves and blue jays, house sparrows and brown thrashers, live in my Louisiana backyard all year round. But others, such as the seasonal goldfinches I've come to love, arrive from far away, staying only a few months before moving on. Though we sometimes like to think of nature as a pastoral portrait — a pleasantly static landscape of trees and sky — the birds I see each day point to a deeper reality, a world where little really stays put.

My birdwatching connected me with John James Audubon, the nineteenth-century bird artist who spent much of his time in Louisiana, not far from where I now live. To find his subjects, Audubon moved around a lot, the old American story of success through mobility. But learning about birds often required him to stand motionless in the woods, falling into a trance of deep observation.

That's why I like watching birds so much. They're a paradox, creatures of quicksilver temperament whose fleeting presence forces me to stay still for a moment in order to truly see them. They point to life's central predicament, that old balance between being and doing, between the present moment and the promise of something better down the road.

It's a mystery I might have overlooked if things had turned out differently some two decades ago. Maybe that birdseed did, in fact, bring me the best luck of all.

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