

Lens
By
Daniel E. White October 7, 2024

Shortly after dawn each morning, the show begins. First up, the doves, bobbing and weaving, trying to maneuver their heads through the wire cage to reach the seeds. Usually, no more than three try at the same time but over time, several more give it a shot. In summer, the smaller Mourning Doves put up with their larger migratory cousins, the White-Winged Doves, who are less schooled in the nicety of sharing; they are bullies, sometimes, to be blunt.

Up pops the male quail to sit on the fence and call to his partner and their brood. One by one, fist-sized fluff balls flap up to the seed log, several crowding onto the dish. The parents stand guard, calling out to reassure their offspring that the coast is clear for the moment. When the juniors have finished, the adults grab a peck or two before jump-flying back to the creek bed.

When the doves have left the feeder, House Finches sing as they mob the wire cage. The males seem proud of their redness on their heads and bodies. The females stay focused on food. Soon, Lesser Goldfinches show up, the golden luster of the males shining when the sun hits them. Frequently, one or more of the group flies to the fountain nearby for a drink, as if needing to wash down the seeds. Occasionally, a drink turns into a bath as the bird gets wet and, doglike, wiggles energetically to dry.

Hummingbirds are early birds that stick around all day. The rest of the visitors spend many of their hours elsewhere.

More birds follow. There is a usual lineup: Curved Billed Thrashers that call out “I’m Here, I’m Here” as they sit in the mesquite trees preparing their entry onto the fence to find their share of morning seed. The male Cardinals are regular, again bringing brilliant color, and often their relative, the Pyrrhuloxia (looking like a splotched cardinal but with a yellow beak) show up for a meal. This year we think we have seen Cardhuloxia, the result of a case of interspecies hanky-panky.

We can count on an Abert’s Towhee pair appearing, a muted chattering announcing their appearance. Not at all muted, the Gila Woodpecker couple shows up, each bird making the sound of a squeaky toy, probably letting each other know that the coast is clear. They continue to squeak even as they thrust their bills into the feeder to snare a peanut, sometime two, before flying elsewhere to enjoy the prize. No worries about talking with their mouths full.

Occasional visitors are the Greater Roadrunner who trots then stops, lifts the tail, and scans the ground for bugs or lizards. Phaenopepla drop by. When the Cooper’s Hawk cruises past, the multitude scatters, reappearing magically just after the hawk has left. We are the hosts for a Say’s Phoebe couple that raises two or three clutches each spring, secure in their belief that no predator can reach their perch on a ledge above our patio floor.

Of course, all of what I have described is seen through the lens of a mid-seventies human being, a novice at watching birds, making up stories based on what he has observed. An ornithologist would see things differently, to say nothing about what any of this seems like to the birds.

An urgent discussion in academe these days is about what works are “foundational” in the canon that makes up an introductory course in Humanities. In the 1960s, Judy and I took Humanities 1A and 1B together at UCR. Most of the course focused on Greek and Roman Civilizations. There was passing reference to species before Homo Sapiens, some nod to Egypt, but little concern for any other civilization. The “canon” was confined to the Mediterranean world, the northern shores.

These days, scholars note that cultures in Asia, Africa, Mesoamerica and other locales were not only extant but sometimes in contact with people from Greece and Rome. Is there some chance that what is referred to as “Western Civilization” was not as homogenous as we were taught, reflecting only the influences of Europe?

The Senior Editor of the *Key Reporter*, Stephanie Bastek, writing in a Summer 2024 article, “Exploding the Canon,” summarized the ongoing debates: “Exploding the canon isn’t just about changing the books we read...It’s about changing the content, yes—but also the lens through which we’re looking at it.”

People of a Certain Age, in 2024, you and I live in a world vastly different than the one 100 or 500 years ago, even different in substantial ways from the one in which we grew up, in a crucial way. More people, more groups, more nationalities are finding their voices and clamoring for a place at the table, whatever that table is.

How much of the ferment in many societies across the globe is a result of people looking at the same phenomena through a lens they have developed in their own culture and space and asserting that they see things most clearly?

Anthropomorphizing the bird society in my backyard is frivolous but fun. I don’t pretend that what I see bears any relationship to how my bird regulars engage the world. There is little significance to what I see through my lens. And it certainly matters not at all to the birds (as long as I keep the feeders filled).

Deciding what knowledge to pass along in a college course or how to co-exist with others, nationally and globally, is infinitely more significant. Who is seeing what through which lens and why?

Click here to email your comments to Dan: danwhitehi@gmail.com