

Jottings for Another May: Tho Much was Lost, Much Abides

The relentless winter of '23 is finally easing its grip, but not without some real setbacks for the shut-in naturalist. A drive to Ten Mile Lake on the 5th revealed a big reduction in the numbers of killdeers. Last year they saved the day, making up for fewer meadowlarks, kestrels, swallows and roadside song, field, and vesper sparrows.

The only migrants gaining in numbers are the red winged blackbirds, cowbirds and grackles—the kind of birds Shakespeare called “night’s black agents.” He saw them as evil omens. I think the heavy use of chemicals is truly endangering far too many beautiful birds.

I did see a huge raft of diving ducks—ring-bills, canvas-backs, redheads and blue bills --all happily frolicking among the ubiquitous mud hens that have arrived in hoards, and many Franklin gulls were also enjoying the warmth and dead bug banquet on US 35. between the north and south lakes.

I thought I might be able to bring home a meal of those beautifully colored and delicious Ten Mile Lake bluegills, but they hadn't moved in yet --still too cold. I did see an interesting spectacle. In the zebra-muscle-cleared water under the bridge connecting the two lakes, a school of seven white suckers, swam flank to flank, the males eagerly crowding the egg-laden females, bent on making sure those eggs got fertilized.

The sucker run used to be a little spearing season all of its own back in the days when smoked white suckers were deemed a real delicacy. Of course they still are, but “the needle-eyed boys” that used to harvest those fish from the cold-running creeks and feeder streams are sleeping in or playing ball sports these days.

The April redhorse sucker run in the Red got lost in the flood this year and it was sad to see over-harvesters making off with far too many of the big female walleyes from

the few slack-water spots where they were trying to spawn. Outdoor ethics seem to have become a thing of the past, and no wardens around either.

I did see a heartening thing as I drove back skirting the refuge near the Orwell dam. Two gorgeous ring-necked roosters were cock-fighting, spurs to spurs, right in the middle of the road. My horn ended their fun. The fact that so many pheasants survived that monster of a winter is a hopeful testimony to the toughness those great game birds possess, given good habitat and access to vital feed. I also think that many more of the roosters in our area could have been harvested last fall, but the young hunters are becoming a rare breed. One rooster can usually easily service a dozen hens.

Getting myself crippled up last winter with two surgeries and general lessening of my spryness, has confined much of my bird watching to my back yard bird feeders. There the little juncos have been the true winter survivors. The May infusion of migrant sparrows has been sparse indeed --two fox sparrows, four chipping sparrows, a dozen pairs of white-throated sparrows and even far fewer of the local English flock as well. Last winter took a real toll. Hope some Harris (black-faced), and white crowns show up soon.

I did envy those able to take advantage of the many clear nights we had last year to get out and star-gaze. The May skies, now are some of the finest for getting the full impact of the glory one can experience by “looking up.” I used to be able to star gaze from my back yard, but light pollution has all but destroyed any hope of back yard star gazing. Even the farmyards have lights that never go out. Thank god I didn’t grow up on an over-lit farm. A kid needs “something like a star” to give him perspective.

Well, the floodwater is about all drained off and now we can pray for timely rains. I hope another dry year doesn’t add to the misery of a nation in free-fall. All we need is

another dust bowl to give us a replay of *The Grapes of Wrath*, albeit we already have migrants galore.

Meanwhile we can still find promise in the great scriptures proclaiming the true good news, “The Heavens declare the glory of God and the firmament showeth forth His handiwork. Day unto day uttereth speech and night unto night showeth forth knowledge. There is no speech nor language where their voice is not heard...In them has he set a tabernacle for the sun, which is like a bridegroom coming out of his chamber.”

Post Script: I really enjoyed the pomp and splendor of the coronation of Charles III. The whole spectacle of the mass was intoned in majestic, 17th century King James Bible English --the language that once made English the model for civilized speech. It made me proud to have been an English teacher who stressed the real thing, The Bard's matchless English. Sadly, We may have witnessed the end of it with that amazing coronation. Google up Rodger Miller's “England Swings (Like a Pendulum Do)”--it fits. “Rosy red cheeks” and all.

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