

The swallows have left. It is always a sign of fall. One day, they are sitting on the power line between the barn and the house, often a hundred in number, swooping and diving as they assiduously reduce the population of insects in our yard. The next day—silence and empty wires. They have left for the winter.

I am not an experienced or knowledgeable bird watcher. I see the most numerous and easily identified birds as they come in the spring to stay or as they migrate through our area to nesting regions farther north, but if I notice a bird that is unfamiliar to me, I do a lot of searching in the field guides before I can be sure that I saw what I thought I saw.

I enjoy the summer birds and notice when the first bluebird appears, the first time we hear the cry of the killdeer, the first sight of the meadowlark or the bobolink. But, I am certainly not a “birder.”

This is not due to lack of interest. I really believe it dates to my youthful nearsightedness. I couldn't really see well enough to identify most birds. And, my musical ability is limited enough that it is hard for me to recognize any but the most common songs.

Still, seeing or hearing an unusual bird is always a treat. We see a lot of migrating waterfowl in the spring, and we look forward to both the song and sight of the oriole. But, I must admit that my favorite birds are of a more mundane and common kind. I like crows, ravens, and blue jays. I think it might be their intelligence and playfulness that attracts me.

There was a raven we watched one summer that had a habit of carrying around something white. I don't know what it was, perhaps a feather or piece of paper, but the bird was feeding at the same time. Each time it landed, it dropped the white object, pecked at whatever was on the ground, then picked up its treasure and carried it to its next feeding place. That was more interesting than a pretty bird song.

But, this weekend, we had a treat in the neighborhood. The premier birder in our area was biking home from a camping trip at Olga Lake when he saw a bird that is rare here. Reuben identified the western kingbird and apparently then alerted the local Audubon folks. So, Saturday afternoon and most of Sunday saw an unusual amount of traffic on our dirt road at the intersection we call the Schoolhouse Corner. I don't know how many of the bird watchers were able to spot the western kingbird and add it to their list—whether life list, state list, yearly list, county list, or some other list. But, that one little bird brought more excitement—and vehicles—to the neighborhood than we have experienced for some time. It was heartening that in the midst of constant bad news and disasters—some natural and others caused by humans—a little bird brought a bright glimpse of a more positive aspect of life.