Woodnotes

Uncommon experiences of nature can creep up on us, or break over us, in a wilderness or at the backyard feeder, touching us in a way that asks to be shared. We welcome the accounts people send us of their special moments—whether in the form of story, essay, or poem—because they remind us that any time, anywhere, any of us who is open to nature may be taken unaware by its charm or its wonder.

THE TWENTY-DOLLAR STARLING

by Jeffrey S. Cramer

There were no cries, no noise, but the occasionally frantic fluttering of wings. Voiceless, so as not to attract predators, it struggled in the net. How long it had been there, I didn't know. By the way some of the netting had entrapped part of its left leg, wing, and tail and its right leg had been completely immobilized by the twisting of the net, it had to have been there awhile.

Our neighbors were away for the weekend. While we were outside playing with our three-year-old daughter, my wife noticed a bird lying in their downed volleyball net. I went over to take a closer look. By the time we found it, the bird would only struggle when it suspected danger. As I approached, it began its frantic attempt to escape, jumping, flapping one wing, with each useless push away from me only succeeding in further tightening the net's grip.

Slowly I wrapped my hand around it. In my hand it stopped struggling. With one finger I stroked its head, at the same time making a soothing *sshhhh* sound as I would to a cat or a child. Try as I might, I could not disentangle the bird from the net. My wife and daughter came over, and together we still could not extricate the bird.

While I still held it, somewhat calmed, in my hand, our daughter gently stroked its head. It was one of those brief moments, rarely offered, when she might be able to truly make contact with, to touch, a free and natural creature.

It was not domesticated, it was not caged, and it allowed her, by not struggling or showing fear, to touch it. She touched it, unknowing of the gift offered her, and I knew that it would soon be forgotten in the days to come.

Reluctantly, we knew we couldn't untangle the net enough to get it free. Did we dare cut our neighbors' net? Would the bird live if we did? Its right leg seemed immobile, perhaps broken. If it was going to die, wouldn't it be better to leave it there for our neighbors to find, to teach them what carelessly leaving this net on the ground could do? And if we did leave the bird there to die, plainly in view from our dining room window, what kind of lesson were we teaching our daughter?

I began to tell her that, no matter how hard we tried, we couldn't get the bird out of the net, that sometimes we can't help no matter how much we want to, that things die. We walked away.

I knew I was calculating the cost of a new net against the life of this bird, the destruction of our neighbors' property, however small and replaceable, with the saving of another kind of neighbor, small and irreplaceable. It seemed hypocritical to give money to save a whale, a rain forest, the planet, and not be willing to do something in a more tangible way. I knew I was doing something incalculably wrong by walking away.

At home we called a local department store to find out the price of a new volleyball net. They quoted us fifteen dollars. Would we pay fifteen dollars to save the life of one bird? We didn't even know what kind of bird it was.

We got out the guidebook. A juvenile European starling. A descendant of one, actually two, of the 250 starlings introduced into New York a century ago. Very adaptive, these immigrants have made a strong foothold in North America, increasing more than a millionfold. Considered pests by some, these birds are here to stay.

I know of a woman who has done much for helping bluebirds reestablish themselves, but she does this at the expense of other birds. She has no qualms about destroying a starling's nest because they are interlopers, non-natives, which have taken over the habitat of bluebirds and others. When I heard her calmly tell of destroying these nests to protect her own chosen species, I was indignant. Who made her the savior of the bluebird, and what savior has the right to bless with one hand and smite with the other? Who was she who could say which species could live and which could die? Who was I who could say whether this one starling could live or die?

It seems a fact, one which we as a species should be ashamed of, that helping is no longer an instinct, that it is something we must think out, plot the costs and consequences of. We no longer, or very rarely, reach out to help without considering the most far-reaching repercussions. We are unwilling to take responsibility for actions that may not, in the final analysis, bring about the beneficial solution we had desired. We have become unwilling to risk being

wrong, and so, in many cases, we have simply become unwilling to respond. Period. To other creatures, to other people, to ourselves, to our children.

We went back, scissors in hand. Into our neighbors' mailbox we slipped an envelope containing twenty dollars and a very apologetic note. The starling struggled as we approached but quickly calmed in my hand. I held it as my wife cut and unwrapped pieces of netting until, with a push of its legs, it leapt from my hand and flew away. I longed for some Disneyesque ending in which, free at last, the starling would look back, tilting its head in comprehension, before flying away—some anthropomorphic sense of gratitude. Instead it just disappeared, quickly, with a no-nonsense, self-preserving efficiency that in itself was a joy to watch.

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