

AIR

I Am a Lover of Birds

by Sharon Baiocco

For as long as I can remember, I have been a lover of birds. You could say I inherited this trait from my father, who was a “pigeon fancier.” Family legend has it that as a boy, famous naturalist Roger Tory Peterson, who lived nearby in Jamestown, New York, came to meet him, because he could imitate all the songs of the birds so well. My father had been raised on a farm, and as my brother and I grew up, Dad brought many domestic and wild birds to live with us in suburban Buffalo.

The first that I can recall was a nest of abandoned crow chicks Dad found in the woods. We raised those chicks on bread and milk and set them free, all except for one we named Sammy. Sammy hung around, dive-bombing strangers who came to our house, storing bits of shiny paper, bobby pins, and the like in a hole in our willow tree. On washday, he would aggravate my grandmother by methodically stepping along her clothesline like a tightrope walker and plucking out clothespins. Sammy came when you called, ate from your hand, and generally showed more sense than some congressmen I know.

As I have said, my father was a “pigeon fancier.” Dad had homing pigeons that he raced on Saturdays in the summer. So, when I was about nine or ten, Dad bought me a pair of bantam chickens, and in time I had a growing flock. I entered them in the huge Erie County Fair, and one of my roosters was so cocky that the judges selected him for a crowing contest. That’s when a judge watches each entry for a period of say, five minutes, and counts the time he crows. Now crowing is a male chicken’s way of boasting about his – you know – prowess – and my bantie was very, very, proud of his, um, prowess. He crowed and crowed and came in second place. I’m guessing he didn’t know it was a contest, or he’d have put a little more effort into it.

At some point Dad decided to build a martin house for our backyard. He was delighted when a family of purple martins, a kind of swallow, selected it for their home. Now a martin house is like a bird apartment building, and the close quarters often produce the same behaviors as in human neighbors – babysitting, extramarital affairs, disputes about property lines, etc. But the real reason Dad built the house was to watch those birds fly. They were wondrous flyers – rising far aloft on the air till they were barely visible, then circling and diving, effortlessly riding the currents like skiers – flashes of purple beauty. Oh, to fly!

All of these recollections are by way of introduction to the serious question I asked myself recently, “Why do humans in all cultures love birds?” Is it their diversity that is so appealing? Yes, in part. Birds are the **flowers of the air**. Others argue that the sounds of birds are the source of our love for them. And bird behavior, as I have described, is also fascinating. But I believe it is not their diversity, their songs, or their behavior that makes us devout lovers of birds. We humans envy **their wings**. Birds have become symbols of peace and freedom in many cultures. Most birds are pacifists. When threatened, they fly away and hide. And, if you’ve ever watched the gulls at the shore suspended motionless in the air as they catch the onshore breeze, you’ve witnessed the pure bliss of freedom.

What would our world **be** without birds? As I understand the Gaia Theory, the Earth functions like a living system. If there were no birds, insects and rodents would soon overpower plant life—and, therefore, animal life, including that of man—would be impossible upon this globe. This is an astounding scientific conclusion.

Today many birds today face extinction. In the last two centuries over 100 bird species have disappeared. Another 1,200—12 percent of the planet's total—face extinction this century.ⁱ We who claim to love birds are to blame for this decline. And like canaries down the coalmine, birds act as a crucial early-warning system that should alert us to the vulnerability of other plants and animals.ⁱⁱ

In the last century, through the magic of *The Peterson Field Guide* series, we became a nation of birdwatchers -- and, more importantly, protectors -- of every form of life on our planet. We must be ever more diligent. We must understand and change our own destructive habits. All living things depend on it. Our lives and our grandchildren's lives depend upon it. Our **spirits** depend upon it. A philosopher who spent his lifetime trying to define **love** once told me, "Love is the apprehension of beauty in the beloved." To paraphrase Robert Frost, "One could do worse than be a lover of birds."

ⁱ BirdLife International, a worldwide conservation organization.

ⁱⁱ Howard Youth, Worldwatch researcher, May 16, 2003.