

FIELD NOTES FROM THE NORTHWEST CORNER OF THE STATE

Our resident screech owls began nesting in late winter, despite the fact that the ground was buried beneath several feet of snow. We here in northwest Iowa nearly despaired of ever seeing another spring, but on March 18th the slough on our farm was suddenly alive with the colorful clamoring of Red Wing Blackbirds. Their arrival was later than I can ever remember, and I have been keeping tabs on them for approximately ten years. We sighted a few Red Tail Hawks, still sporting bits of winter plumage, and tree sparrows, song sparrows and slate colored juncos thronged to the feeders.

Eventually a few meadow larks arrived to trill their welcome spring melodies from fenceposts and utility poles, and what a pleasant sound .

One by one the juncos left for their far north nesting grounds, and suddenly we realized there were no more snow buntings, and the horned larks had disbanded and paired off. Robins hopped about the lawn and cleaned up on the mountain ash berries they had overlooked last autumn.

The purple martins arrived on the 22nd of April and circled frantically above the spot where their house had been last fall, so we hurriedly hoisted the house and six pair moved in, bag and baggage. The yard was suddenly a busy place as they trilled and swooped, deciding on which apartment best suited their purpose.

A pair of Canadians settled down in the slough and built a nest atop an old muskrats house, but something destroyed the eggs, so they have started another, this time we hope with greater success. We toss shelled corn to them when we go out to check the cows, and have been able to get within ten feet of them. The slough is now filled with Red Wings, Yellow Headed Blackbirds, Coots, Shovelers and Blue Winged Teal.

On May 9th we saw black and white warblers in the ash tree near the kitchen window and sighted yellow warblers a few days later. We also spotted a pair of white crowned sparrows and a Harris sparrow flitting around the barn and the buzzing noises we heard from the vicinity of the slough turned out to be dozens of Cerulean Warblers.

In early May the trees were filled with Kinglets, and just as suddenly they were gone. I was down in the grove one morning watching them when I noticed a bird which I first overlooked as a Downy Woodpecker, but on closer observation I found it to be a Yellow Bellied Sapsucker. I had never seen one here before and was happy to add it to my life list. My field guide states they are shy and retiring, but indeed it seemed quite unafraid. I have not seen it since.



As I write this it is late May. The barn swallows are busy constructing their mud-cup nests....Brown Thrashers are building in the grove, all five wren houses on the farm are occupied, and the saucy little tenants fill the early morning hours with their song. Flickers drum and again we have Red Headed Woodpeckers about.

Dicksissels call from the telephone wires above the alfalfa fields and Kildeer feign broken wings down behind the barn. Blue Jays emit their raucous threats and high in a maple above my garden a Rose Breasted Grosbeak sang his hauntingly lovely spring song.

Yesterday when we were eating lunch a male Baltimore Oriole alighted in a bed of red tulips. He perched on a tulip stem and attempted to extract something from within the flower. The bird was too heavy for the stem to bear his weight and he swayed to the ground, and he acted for all the world like he was enjoying his ride. He tried it half a dozen times before he gave up the performance and flew away.

It had been a long, cruel winter and the spring was wet and cold, so bird life was more welcome than ever before and how grateful we are for their color and song. When the little wren sings on the garden fence, I take time to sit back and listen to the song, for no nightengale ever sang more sweetly, than that little brown wren on a north-west Iowa farm.

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