

The birds are the others, appearing so alien from us in every way. Most people might not ever try to understand the lives of birds, assuming that we can never know exactly what their thoughts are, or even if they have any. So different from us the birds seem. Yet as I peer into their lives in the quiet and still conifer forests of the Cascade Mountains, I perceive a kinship, one which shows me that our basic motivations, fears, and emotions are very similar.

It is after the hectic breeding season, when all young have left the nest, yet responsibilities for some parents continue. Certain young birds are still being fed by their parents, extending their adolescence for as long as possible, though they are physically capable of fending for themselves. A dark-eyed junco along the trail is feeding an insect to its young. The young bird then continues to quiver its wings, following the adult through the treetops. This seems on the verge of harassment; it looks as if the parent is annoyed, at least I would have been. *Get a job*, I'd say.

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I walk for long periods now seeing few birds; many keep a lower profile following the breeding season and are difficult to find. Others gather into family groups and mixed-species flocks that travel through the woods together seeking food on bark, leaves, and the forest floor.

Suddenly, as I enter a red alder thicket, I am surrounded by a group of chattering chestnut-backed chickadees. The friendly chickadees keep a wary eye on me while going about their activities, and constantly call back and forth to one another. Their behaviors attract a winter wren and a golden-crowned kinglet; the wren seems to glare at me from within the thick foliage, as if demanding to know my business, and would I please move on.

I leave the alder thicket and enter an area of mature forest; the tall columns of hemlock and fir trees allow little light to reach the forest floor, and their foliage absorbs the wind and sound. Ahead is a family group of curious gray jays. They silently glide from tree to tree and to the dimly-lit forest floor, whistling encouragingly soft tones to each other as if to say that all is well, and ignore the big hairy beast. A Swainson's thrush appears unconvinced and continues giving an alarm call, even while holding a large insect in its beak. I hate to be such a disruption and feel a fleeting sense of unnecessary guilt.

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Later, I come upon another group of jays, who at first behave similarly to the first group. But suddenly, a few of them high in the tree canopy emit discordantly harsh sounds of near-panic. The smooth serenity of the deep forest is shattered. Again I feel guilty, and wish I could tell the birds I mean them no harm.

But then I see a movement in the treetops: a hawk! A sharp-shinned hawk, predator of...birds! The jays knew it all along. They mob the hawk

and create such a commotion that I start to side with the hawk, and almost cheer when it takes flight to make a quick grab at a brash young jay, intent on counting coup. The attack fails. The hawk flies off, and I get a flashing glimpse of the dispirited raptor. Perhaps the jay had learned a lesson. But the hawk may have also sharpened its skills. The jays should remain attentive, if they know what is good for them.

Further along the trail, I come upon a small mountain lake; tens of thousands of insects fly back and forth just above the water. There is an abundant trout population in the lake; the fish can be clearly seen, even at greater depths, and they continually leap out of the water after the insects. To all appearances, the lake is a healthy ecosystem. But there are no birds. Why are there not scores of swallows, warblers, and flycatchers, gorging themselves on the thick mass of flying invertebrates? Optimistic, I wonder if most species have simply left for southern wintering areas. And I realize that my understanding of nature is far from complete.

Someone once said that any animal knows more than we do. I don't know about that, but on this day I have been reminded of the ties between the natural world and myself. And as a result, I have become richer and more knowledgeable.