

EXPLOSIONS OF COLOR AND SONG

By **ROB BETTASO**

As we spin closer to this year's Summer Solstice, my days begin very early. It's not that I choose to depart from the land of Nod; I love sleep. But when those earliest birds commence to singing in their pre-dawn chorus, my mind is compelled to leave dreamland and enter waking life.

So, at this time of year, that means that sometime between 4:00 and 4:30AM, I groggily become aware of the Robin's rising and falling phrases coming through my open window. As the similar sounding Black-headed Grosbeak and Western Tanager also inhabit my yard, I have to focus my mind to try and sort out the three species' rhythmically patterned songs. It does seem that the Robin is generally the first to start singing and also that he does so from a perch that is lower in the vegetation.

While I'm a life-long bird lover, I've never seriously attempted to learn their vocalizations (songs and calls). Yes, yes, I know, "there's an 'app' for that" but, given my unapologetically Luddite nature, I have yet to take the plunge into "smart phone" technology. Our species is already too "smart" for its own good.

Time is of the essence when it comes to capturing the full majesty of our local dawn song. As such, shortly after waking, I boil up a small pot of water, pour it into a "Melitta" coffee filter and let it drip through the grounds and into my insulated travel mug. Since the bird diversity just in my yard alone is rewarding, I need go no further than my own small property to revel in avian melodies. Often, I will slowly amble through the yard till the sun has risen and my mug is empty.

Then, fully caffeinated, I will frequently stroll along the White Mountain Apache boundary (quite near my house) and head to Walnut Creek, less than two miles from my neighborhood. As I make my way, I will continue to try and pick out the different birds by ear. Alas, I'm a slow learner and seem to need to reacquaint myself with most species on an almost daily basis.

Typically, I will resist the urge to check out the marsh at Big Spring as I know that most of its birds will remain active much later than the riparian species along Walnut Creek. Instead, I make a bee-line for "Turkey Track Trail" which, before long, drops down into the drainage where willows and alders hug the stream banks.

In the canopy and especially in the middle- and under-stories, the vegetation seems to almost shimmer with activity. I reflect on all the critical events that have occurred for these species in the past few months since approximately the arrival of the Spring Equinox. As day lengths increase, the various types of birds (both year-round residents and the warm-season-only species) have had to carve out their breeding territories, defend them against rivals, attract mates and begin courtship. Once mating has concluded and the birds are paired up, the following energy-demanding tasks must also occur: constructing (or refurbishing) nests; laying and incubating eggs; feeding nestlings and, eventually, feeding the fledglings.

Some birds will lose their progeny along the way to severe weather, predators or other mishaps. Many species will then stoically begin a second, replacement batch of young and run through the whole process again. Some species will routinely lay and brood a second clutch of eggs even when the first round of young have successfully fledged and are making their way in the world without their parents' help.

The upshot of all this procreation is that this lushly green world is positively pulsating with life. Within a few minutes of my remaining motionless along the creek, I watch goldfinches, vireos and phoebes twist and weave in the vegetation; capturing bugs and feasting on the blooms, young shoots and the earliest fruiting and seed producing plants.

I poke my way along the trail as it follows the creek and eventually leave the drainage and loop back on to the Hitching Post Trail. I conclude my stroll by taking in the sights and sounds of Big Springs and then head for home. My final tally of birds is nothing to brag about -- 33 species -- but it is quite satisfying to see and hear that many species on a walk of relatively short duration (less than three hours), distance (less than five miles) or effort (it

doesn't take much out of me to lift a pair of binoculars up to my eyes from time to time). When I return home, not only do I consider my jaunt to be the perfect start to another day but I also have seen one species of bird that I don't recall seeing in the area before -- a female (or possibly an immature) Townsend's Warbler which are considered uncommon migrants and breed much further north.

On another day and in a different section of the forest (the Timber Mesa area), I go for a morning hike with a friend (Gary) I met through my recent apprenticeship with the Navajo County's Search and Rescue crew. While the mixed conifer habitat we hike through is nowhere near as rich in bird diversity as the riparian areas, we do encounter a bit of avian natural history that is unique in my experiences.

After about five miles of walking, we stop to sit in the shade of a clump of junipers. While I'm drinking deeply from my canteen, I hear the commotion of what sounds like the chattering call of a Northern Oriole which surprises me as I usually associate that species with the deciduous woodlands. Suddenly, we realize that we have ring-side seats to a Battle Royal, as the oriole is embroiled in a serious grudge match with a similarly sized Hepatic Tanager.

The two males are a blur of red, black and orange as they engage in an aerial dogfight of intense ferocity. They are literally cart-wheeling through the air not 30 feet from where we are sitting but suddenly break, like two prize-fighters separating from a clinch. They each take brief respite on adjacent branches in a young Ponderosa but just as quickly re-engage for further midair battle. We watch, both Gary and I speechless, as their tussle continues and then the birds drop from the air and commence to scuffling on the ground like some kind of insane Manila cock-fight.

At this point, I'm fumbling around looking for my binoculars which I had mindlessly laid on the ground underneath my daypack. I find them and am up and on my feet trying to focus the birds in my binoculars but their brawl is so intense that I can't keep my glasses trained on their gyrating forms.

After perhaps a minute or two, both birds seem to decide that something has been settled and they fly to perches back in another, nearby pine. Now, I'm finally able to get a close look at both species: the cantaloupe orange oriole busy smoothing his breast feathers with his rapier-like beak and the tanager, with his name-sake liver-hued wings and back contrasting with his bright orange-red chest and stomach.

Before long, both birds fly off in slightly different directions. The oriole continues his taunting, rolling chatter and the tanager, not about to lose the last word, issuing a distinct "chuck" call note.

The ornithologists use a term for squabbles and harassments that occur between different types of birds; they call it "inter-specific agonistic behavior." And while it is common to see many different species of bird mob and antagonize raptors, it is much less common in situations that do not involve birds of prey. I have, on occasion, watched robins grapple with jays and I have also commonly observed woodpeckers in heated arguments with other woodpecker species (never mind their on-going wars with squirrels).

But, when all is said and done, mostly what I see in the bird world is peace, love and understanding. That, and lots and lots of colors. And, of course, pure and joyful song.