

# The Bark Patrol of the Winter Woods

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Bird lovers come in all stripes. For hundreds of years, poets, artists and musicians have found birds to be a well-spring of inspiration. A few classic examples (and personal favorites) include *The Windhover* (by Gerard Manley Hopkins), *Right and Left* (by Winslow Homer) and *The Lark Ascending* (by Rafe Vaughn Williams).

Scientists too have pulled back the feathers, so to speak, of the mysteries of bird flight; avian anatomy and physiology and bird natural history and ecology, to name just a few avenues of study. Citizen science (a phenomena of growing importance) is the use of average Joes like us to play an active role in the collection of field observations which are then used by biologists to expand the power of their own data.

One of the earliest examples of citizen science is the Audubon Societies' Christmas Bird Count. Over the many decades that this annual bird tally has been in use, a tremendous volume of data points have been amassed, allowing ornithologists to plot population trends within and between species over time.

In several of the many places I've lived, I have enjoyed participating in Christmas Bird Count although, I must confess, I've been remiss in assisting said event since moving to Pinetop. This year I intend to pay closer attention to the announcement of the count so that I might join in the fun.

I can say that, since retiring in 2014, I have significantly increased the amount of time I spend bird-watching. Typically, I take several walks a week with binoculars slung around my neck and a Peterson Bird Guide in my hip-pocket. Even before setting out for a bird walk, I generally spend the earliest part of every day making coffee while gazing out my kitchen window at the birds that are having their breakfasts at one of my seed or suet feeders (and hummingbird feeders replace the suet feeders during our warm season).

Although I'm certainly no hot-shot "birder," I have enjoyed watching birds since my pre-teens. In those earliest days, like many a Michigander, I considered the most obvious and common species (blue jays, cardinals and robins) to be entrancing, both in their beauty and behaviors. As I aged and became consumed by a restlessness that lasted decades, I traveled to 48 U.S. States and over two dozen countries. In each and every place I lived or visited, I considered identifying the local birds as a priority of the highest order.

Here in Pinetop-Lakeside, I'm lucky in that embarking on a productive and pleasant bird walk takes no more effort than walking out my front door. Not only is my own yard rich with bird species but, within a mile radius of my home, there are enough different habitats to provide opportunities for seeing water birds on Rainbow and Woodland lakes, riparian birds along Walnut Creek, marsh birds at Big Springs, forest birds in several nearby stands of Ponderosa, Pinyon-Juniper, and deciduous woodland, as well as birds inhabiting open fields and the varied micro-habitats of our semi-rural neighborhoods.

The first time I read *Catcher in The Rye*, some time in Junior High, I was struck by the fact that not only did Holden Caulfield (the novel's young protagonist) not know where the ducks in Central Park went in winter but that every adult he asked didn't seem to know either. Too young to understand Salinger's symbolism, I somewhat smugly thought to myself: "Doesn't everyone know that some birds migrate with the changing seasons?"

But, according to a few studies (some of which include data from Christmas Bird Counts), we have seen shifts in some bird species migrations in recent decades. One theory for these shifts is that they may be due, in part, to climate change. I have a friend living near Blue, Arizona who is convinced that, over the course of the last twenty years or so, a few bird species that used to head south for the winter are now year-round residents.

Such were the thoughts running through my mind as I stopped to check a bird while walking along a local trail through a mixed-conifer forest. Before I could get a definitive make and model of the small passerine, it flew from its perch and out of sight. Nonetheless, based on my brief observation, I had the distinct impression that it was a warbler as it appeared to be smaller than a junco and with a thin, needle-pointed

bill and a cocked posture. Unfortunately, the lighting was such that I hadn't been able to see much more than a silhouette. While I was fairly sure that it wouldn't be unprecedented for, say, a Yellow-rumped Warbler to be seen in this part of the State so late in the season, it did strike me as something of a rare occurrence.

Not only may we be witnessing seasonal shifts in bird distributions, we know that we are, quite definitively, seeing changes in bird abundance over time for many different species. Of course, the reasons for such changes can be complex and may be due to not only climate changes but also landscape level alterations (often human wrought) that impact food availability, cover and predator/competitor concentrations.

Based on my own local observations (very unscientific observations, I hasten to add) a few of these changes may be having a positive effect on a few of our more commonly observed species including some of the following: corvids (Scrub and Steller's jays, the American Crow and Common Raven); Ruby-crowned Kinglet; Red-shafted Flicker, the Acorn and Lewis's woodpeckers; Mountain Chickadee; the Brown Creeper and our three species of nuthatch (White-breasted, Red-breasted, and Pygmy). Several of these birds I collectively refer to as the Bark Patrol of the Winter Woods as they are conspicuously seen (and heard) hammering and chiseling at the bark, cambium, acorns and cones of the local oaks and conifers (both the living and the dead trees) in their quest for food and shelter.

To my mind, it doesn't seem like much of a stretch to think that the species comprising The Bark Patrol (or, to use the ecologist's terminology -- a "guild") may have benefited from climate changes, tree diseases and parasites and/or recent forest fires such that important food sources (seeds, nuts, grubs and other arthropods) are presently more available and suited to the Bark Patrol's mode of foraging. If I had home internet (or a University library) I would consult the journals to see what data exists to support or refute this theory as I would imagine that it is a topic of some study.

Lest you think that I'm suggesting things are improving generally for wild creatures, let me disabuse you of that notion post haste. I, like many who work or play in nature's realm, see many, MANY more examples of species decline, ecological disruption and a depressingly widespread loss in biodiversity. While there have been pre-human periods of massive biological changes in earth's history, the current situation can most certainly, at least in part, be laid at the feet of humankind.

But rather than slip into counter-productive despair, I opt to enjoy nature whenever and wherever I can and to do my best in sharing my appreciation of our living planet with others. Today, for example, I am comforted by simply strolling through the winter woods and watching as a Red-breasted Nuthatch descends, head-first, down a pine's trunk. He cranes his neck backwards and around so as to keep a close eye on me as I walk along the trail. Once I'm safely past, I hear him issue his "tiny tin horn" call, perhaps to let the other members of his guild know that, as far as he's concerned, this particular bipedal bouncer has moved out of his threat zone.

Year-round, but especially in winter, I frequently watch rowdy family groups of Acorn Woodpeckers as they jockey for position up, down and around the trunks and branches of our conifers and oaks. They are an eye-catching, gaudy species which seemingly every bird guide describes as having "a clownish black, white and red head pattern" of feathers. I have spent many an enjoyable quarter-hour watching Acorn Woodpeckers as they leap-frog from tree to tree, spiraling along the limbs, squabbling amongst themselves and, quite aggressively dive-bombing the resident tassel-eared squirrels.

Woodpeckers exemplify the biological axiom that "form follows function." That is to say, if you look at the shape (the morphology) of the woodpecker's body, you can imagine how the woodpecker makes his living. To wit: the stiff tail feathers serve as a stabilizing prop while a woodpecker uses his bill to excavate into trees; his toes are arranged with two toes forward and two toes backward (zygodactyl) to allow for more secure footing; the bill is obviously jack-hammer like but also, the tongue can uncoil from within to as much as four times the length of the bill (handy for extracting bugs from holes pecked into the bark; the skull of woodpeckers is so adapted to a life of pummeling trees that engineers have studied its design in an effort to build better football helmets and the rapping of a woodpecker's bill against the bark is not only used in foraging (the searching for, and the storing of, food), it is also vital for nest and roost excavation. Lastly, the rat-a-tat-tatting is not only an iconic sound of the forest but the percussive bursts are also useful in attracting mates and warding off potential competitors.

As I conclude my walk, with twilight now approaching, a chickadee lights on a nearby branch and I marvel at how a creature so small can keep warm during our long, cold winter nights. What secrets of nature allow such a mite-of-a-bird to stoke and run its internal furnace all night long with no midnight snacks or heavy blankets? And while scientific investigations have shed light on how the chickadee's rich foods, nightly winter torpor, air-trapping feathers and pocketed position deep in the muffled center of the Ponderosa forest help it to endure subzero temperatures, it nonetheless strikes me as one of our world's commonplace miracles.

Perhaps Robert Frost said it best in his poem "Design" when he wrote (in this case, about a spider within its web, constructed in a flowering heal-all plant): "What but design of darkness to appall? - If design govern in a thing so small." Frost's words might suggest that we are all part of a Master Plan and that the same forces that govern moths, spiders and chickadees also shape our own fate.