



Lighter Side

By John Kasun

The Bird Whisperer

If you ever meet my wife, Sandra, you would see an attractive, always well-groomed woman with twinkling eyes and a quick smile. If you had the opportunity to get to know her, you would learn that she is an excellent shot with a rifle or a shotgun, a champion archer, a successful bowhunter and one of the best trackers I know. My wife is a truly remarkable woman and is totally comfortable throwing knives and tomahawks, cooking over an open fire or hosting a formal dinner party in our home.

However, one of her lesser-known passions is professional bird-feeding. I say "professional" because she knows what each different species of bird prefers to eat. She knows when they come, when they go and where they go when they go. Because of her interest, one wall of our garage looks like a FEMA food bank for birds. The things you will not find in our "stash" are any of the normal bird feed mixes that contain a lot of wasteful filler or the seeds that only the exotic double headed, three winged blue parrot that lives in the tropical rainforest eats. No, the seed Sandra serves is custom-mixed and made only from the finest seeds available.

While normal people may go the store for some assorted bird seed plus maybe a 10 pound bag of black oil sunflower seeds as an extra treat, I normally unload a minimum of 250 pounds of black oil seed, several bags each of safflower and Nyjer seed plus meal worms and about 20 suet blocks per trip to the feed store. There is no junk food for the birds coming to my house.

Needless to say there are numerous bird feeders on our property to accommodate birds of every persuasion: those that prefer hanging feeders, those that like platform feeders, those that choose ground feeders and everything in between. When all of the birds show up, it looks like the bar scene out of Star Wars.

We live in a wooded area and, as you might expect, we also get our share of squirrels. Trying to keep a squirrel out of a bird feeder is like trying to keep a politician's hand out of your wallet; it is just not going to happen. While I am not interested in keeping the squirrels out entirely, I would appreciate if they occasionally considered a short spell on Weight Watchers, which might allow my bank account to recover slightly. The interesting thing about the squirrels is that they might be their own worst enemies. I marvel at how easily they can shinny up a small steel pole holding a feeder or perform a death-defying leap from a nearby bush. However,

lately, I noticed that some of them are getting so fat, they often decide not to try the Evel Knievel approach from an overhead branch, which leaves only climbing the pole. However, they are so chubby that they cannot seem to get a good grip on the pole, which often results in them almost making it to the feeder but suddenly and slowly sliding back down with puzzled looks on their faces. The squirrels are not the only ones gaining weight. At times, I swear the birds' feathers seem to be fitting a little too tightly as well. I also noticed they are walking more and flying less. This could be due to excess butt baggage.

My wife's feeding efforts are not confined to the winter months and continue on right through the spring and summer as she tries to provide our feathered friends with extra food during the nesting period. She has bluebird boxes and bluebird feeders filled with meal worms strategically placed around the property. She is very dedicated to helping the bluebirds, as she is able to go to a feeder with a container of meal worms and, before placing the worms in the feeder, tap gently on the side of the container. Normally, within a minute or two, she will have bluebirds flying into nearby trees waiting for the delivery of lunch. I call her the "Bird Whisperer."

Of course, with any encounter with wildlife, you are reminded at some time that Mother Nature is truly in charge. One mid-summer morning, as my wife and I were having coffee on the patio, birds fluttered about the nearby feeders and a squirrel got a drink from our pond waterfall. Suddenly, with a loud swooshing sound, a hawk with wings outspread came to a halt in mid-air right over the table. For just an instant, it seemed as if the world stood still and were frozen in time right over our picnic table. Just inches away was a hawk, wings outspread, with its talons closed on what appeared to be a frightened and unbelieving small bird. In the next instant, with a few powerful motions of its wings, the hawk turned and sailed to the top of a large oak nearby, landing and cupping its wings as if to protect its meal from any thief.

Saying that my wife was upset would be a vast understatement. That small and normally well-composed, refined and soft-spoken woman had no trouble making that fact quite clear as she shook her fist at the hawk while saying some personally unflattering things.

"Sandra," I said, "relax; this is a dedicated bird-feeding area and, after all, that hawk is a bird and he needs to eat too."

Needless to say that was not the proper thing to say at that delicate moment. It does not pay to make the Bird Whisperer angry.

John Kasun writes from his home in Duncansville, Pennsylvania, where he keeps looking for recipes for roasted bluebird and stuffed dove breast to see if he can recoup some of the money he spends on bird feed.



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