

# For the Birds

By Margie Patlak

We had been playing hide-and-seek for about an hour.

I had just settled down to a steaming brew of espresso on my deck, intending to focus my eyes on the distant line of spruces that define the edge of the bay, when something caught my eye much closer — the flitting of a small bird who announced its presence by moving the pine needles in front of me. As soon as I focused my binoculars on the feathered flurry, it would disappear, only to resurface behind a new patch of shaking needles, tantalizing me with a colorful bit of its anatomy — a spot of red on its head, or an olive wing streaked with gray.

I frantically flipped through my bird book to find it, but that proved futile. Although I patted myself on the back for astutely noticing all that I could in my few fleeting glimpses, inevitably the one feature that distinguished the bird from all its close cousins was the one feature I neglected to see, or more likely, neglected to notice — who would think its speckled breast was key?

And so the hide-and-seek game started all over again. Come on, show me some breast, I beseeched the bird like a lecher at a peep show, and by this time my coffee turned as cold as the chill morning air in Maine that enveloped it.

What does it matter if it's a chestnut-sided warbler or a red-headed kinglet? Either way it's just a bird. But I was determined to identify this bird because I was new to the neighborhood, and I wanted to know my neighbors.

My husband and I had just purchased a small slice of forest and rocky beach, along with its glass-walled house on the Schoodic Peninsula. The evergreens that completely surround our house on three sides pro-

vide plenty of perches for the many species of birds that fly by, including bald eagles, warblers and thrushes, and our backyard seascape brought us floating lines of eider ducks, solitary herons and numerous other shore birds.

People are few and far between. Our closest human neighbors are a 10-minute walk away, and it takes us 20 minutes to drive to the closest town of just a few storefronts. When we told our Philadelphia friends of our plan to spend our entire summer in Maine, where the only skyscrapers are giant spruces, and the closest movie theater is an hour's drive away, many looked aghast at our plan to "live in the middle of nowhere," as they put it. Although I was eager to experience a more natural environment, I shared some of their trepidation and wondered how we would survive for so long without plays, symphonies and the general buzz and hum of the city's human hive.

To many of us raised in urban environments, nature is a monolithic backdrop with no distinguishing features — a solid-colored curtain that offers no way near the drama of the human play that unfolds before it. We don't see the twisted bark of the cedar, hear the whistling of cardinals or notice the ants carting away their dead under our feet. The human is the only species in our world, except for maybe the dog or cat. We've lost the ability to experience the bustling biodiversity around us.

I, too, had my city blinders on, like the horses that pull the carriages for historic tours of Philadelphia. But once in Maine, I realized there was much to see, hear and even smell "in the middle of nowhere." I couldn't see an exhibit at a museum, but I could see a field resplendent with the indigo stalks of wild lupines in bloom. I couldn't hear a sym-

phony, but I could enjoy the operatic overtures of seals and seagulls. There wasn't the aroma of my garden lilies, but I could smell the scents of seaweed, mud and forest all mixed together that reminded me of childhood summers spent in Maine.

Not that I fully experienced what was around me at first. I had to train my eye to see the flapping flight of the eagle, my ear to hear the eerie call of the loon, and my nose to distinguish the spicy smells of pines from the more pungent scents of firs.

A good way to overcome obliviousness to all the wildlife around us is to observe and to name it. When we fine-tune our naming — calling one bird a red-headed woodpecker and another a downy woodpecker, we actually see the red head versus the black-and-white head of the two species. We see twice as much by making these verbal distinctions.

Our ability to name things is so integral to what we see and know that when people experience damage to the part of the brain devoted to naming distinctions in the animate world, they not only can't tell apart two different species of woodpeckers, but they can't tell a kangaroo from an ostrich.

Why do I need to know whether it's a warbler or a kinglet that is shaking the pine needles in front of me? For the same reason I need to know whether it's Susan or Mary who I see at a party in Philadelphia. By knowing such distinctions, my world becomes richer with double the amount of perception, double the number of friends, and I have a greater awareness of what is around me.

So dammit, come out from behind those leaves you bird. I just want to know your name!

*Margie Patlak is a science writer who is currently writing a collection of essays about her encounters with the natural world in Maine.*

## Commentary