



By Margaret Evans, Editor

Y'all know how I tend to get my little obsessions – subjects I become wildly interested in, then write about ad nauseam? (That's a rhetorical question. Of *course* you know.)

Well, my latest thing is birds.

I know what you're thinking: *Groan. How terribly middle-aged, middle-class, middlebrow, and perfectly predictable. She is now becoming one of those earnest little ladies with practical shoes and binoculars.*

For the record, I actually *like* those earnest little ladies, have long worn practical shoes, and am hoping to acquire some decent binoculars soon; but that is not exactly what's going on here. It's much weirder, I assure you.

A few weeks ago, I started experiencing what I can only describe as Strange Bird Events. On three consecutive days, a male cardinal swooped across my yard, right in front of me, as I was returning from my morning walk. A bright flash of red streaking the early, overcast gray (three days in a row!), the occurrence was unusual enough that I mentioned it on Facebook the third day, asking, "What does it mean when a red bird crosses your path? That's good luck, right?" I was joking . . . just riffing on the old black cat/bad luck chestnut. I didn't actually think it meant *a nything*.

Well, you should have seen the discussion that ensued! As it turns out, lots of people take Strange Bird Events very seriously. Depending on whom you ask, a triple cardinal flyby could be

For The Birds

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a harbinger of good luck, a warning that something in your life needs extra attention, a shout-out from a deceased loved one, or any number of other memos. Apparently, most Native American and eastern traditions view birds as divine messengers. As a thoroughly southern WASP, I was not raised to recognize such messages, much less translate them, but the older I get the more convinced I become that wisdom is wisdom, wherever you find it. I've also grown to believe the natural world speaks to us, if only we have ears to hear.

In other words, I'm not inclined to look a gift cardinal in the mouth. Er, beak.

The evening of my third "visitation," I got a call from my mom saying my dad had just been diagnosed with a subdural hematoma and would need surgery right away. *On his head!* (He's fine now, thank you.) I have no idea whether my cardinals were heralds of this news, bearers of some other tidings I've yet to untangle, or just three random birds flying across my yard. Again, I'm not fluent in this language.

A few days later, however, I was walking toward my office on Bay Street when another male cardinal came flying directly at me – right at eye level – then rose over my head, just missing my face. It all happened in a flash, but somehow felt like slow motion, too – almost like time stood still for my cardinal encounter.

I shared the experience with a friend who's well-versed in these matters, asking her what it might mean. She replied: "I would say that's kind of the equivalent of someone knocking you upside the head because you aren't looking where you're going and need to take stock of where you are. It is as directionally directional as directional can get, if you get my drift . . . Either that, or it's mating season and he thought you were attractive."

See, that's the thing about these bird signs. Depending on your frame of mind, they are either full of import . . . or completely meaningless. And, by the way, every detail matters – direction of flight, type of bird, proximity of bird to human – or none of them do.

I am well aware that many of you are reading this, thinking: *She's finally lost her cotton-picking mind.*
Others of you are thinking: *She's finally come around. She gets it.*

Forgive me, but I agree with both those analyses. What I'm beginning to understand is that there are many ways of "knowing," and some of those ways aren't what we think of as intellectual or "mental." They're more what you might call "intuitive." The natural world communicates in the language of intuition, and I have the capacity to interpret that language. I can be part of that conversation. We all can.

Obviously, this is no blazing new insight. Many societies throughout history have cultivated this kind of knowledge. We contemporary Westerners, though – with all our industry and technology and Enlightenment-inspired rationality – have managed to cut ourselves off from the natural world, allowing this side of ourselves to atrophy. And Western-style Christianity – especially the Protestant variety – has tended to frown on such notions as "superstitious" or "pagan," separating itself from its own tradition of nature mysticism. (St. Francis himself is said to have preached a sermon to the birds, referring to them as his "brothers and sisters.") I am very much a product of that Enlightenment culture, with no-nonsense protestant blood running through my veins (along with a heavy dash of middle class southern propriety).

Nevertheless, it was probably inevitable I'd grow up to be some kind of peculiar Bird Lady. The first picture of me that ever appeared in the newspaper – *any* newspaper – was of a five-year-old me sitting outside the state capitol building in Raleigh, NC, where I was visiting my grandparents. We'd been feeding the pigeons, and my little girl self was covered in them. There was a pigeon on my head, one on each shoulder, a few on my feet and in my lap. It must have been an odd enough sight – not something you saw everyday – because the photo made the front page of the Sunday news.

Though I've always found birds beautiful and interesting, I began to develop something of a fascination after the Cypress Wetlands Trail opened in Port Royal. It isn't your typical fascination, either – the kind that drives people to take photographs, paint, and study up on birds. No, it's more like a powerful, irresistible . . . connection. I can't stay away. If I had the time, I would stand on that rookery boardwalk watching those birds for hours, and I feel like the birds watch me back. Like they see into my soul. We have staring contests. Showdowns. Sometimes I just watch them go about their business. They're very efficient, the birds. I envy their peaceful efficiency.

It seems like birds are everywhere for me lately. I recently took one of those obnoxious quizzes on Facebook – you know, the ones you can't stand but can't quite resist? – to determine my "Spirit Animal." Turns out, I'm the Hawk . . . unless you believe the other quiz I took, which

determined that I am the Owl. Either way, I'm a large, imposing bird. Coincidence? What about the fact that the last two novels I read for my book club just happened to be *The Goldfinch* and *The Invention of Wings*?

And, incidentally, that club is called the *Mockingbird* Book Club. Hello?!

Okay, I'm having a little fun with you now. A bit of a lark. (Pun intended.) But that's only because I'm still not comfortable talking about this stuff. I'm afraid you will laugh at me, so I'm laughing first. That's what we do in my family.

There is a bird that sings to me every morning on my walk – it's been singing to me for years, as if calling to me with some task, some assignment. I haven't been able to identify the bird, but its song sounds like this: "*We need you, we need you, we need you.*"

My nice, normal, sweetly southern self isn't quite sure what to make of that call. But she's listening for further instructions. In fact, she's all ears.

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