

A FASHIONABLE HOBBY

I've been watching birds all my life. I grew up in a rural part of England and when I was a small child there were birds everywhere. My father took me for walks down the country lanes and lifted me up so I could peer into the bird's nests along the hedgerows. The tall trees in the village churchyard were filled with nesting Rooks — a bird like the American Crow. Their incessant cawing during the breeding season was one of the features of my village life.

We also shared a part of our house with some birds. A starling nested in one end of the eaves; house sparrows nested at the other end but the birds didn't always stay outside the house. Once when I was small and sitting in my high chair after lunch, sparrows hopped through the open window and started to eat my food. Sometimes starlings fell down our chimney and we would find a sooty, bedraggled bird flapping around desperately trying to find a way out.

I collected bird's eggs as a boy and I remember tramping over the green English countryside in the spring sunshine looking in fields and hedgerows. I ate some of them but mostly I bored two small holes in the shell and blew out the contents and kept the shell in a cardboard box. We hunted for the eggs of a bunting called a Yellowhammer. These eggs were a pale ivory in color with thin irregular dark lines over them as if a child

had scribbled on them —the local children called the bird the ‘scribbly-master’. Today it’s illegal to collect eggs but I did enjoy those egg hunting times in my childhood.

My father fed the birds in our yard. He put out table scraps and hung up pieces of suet and cheese rinds for the titmice. The birds that came to feed were house sparrows, starlings, wood pigeons and titmice. I was in my late teens when I first acquired a pair of binoculars for serious bird watching.

My bird watching career finally took off in 1981 when I married Carol. We found that we had many things in common and watching birds was one of them. I’ve been on many bird watching trips with her. In Texas we’ve been to Palo Duro Canyon, High Island, South Texas, Big Bend, plus several very smelly sewage treatment facilities. Further afield we’ve been to New Mexico, Arizona, Colorado, England and Scotland.

We’ve always encouraged birds to come to our yard. When we lived in Amarillo we also had a bird in the house. One evening, as we were eating dinner, our front door crashed open and a pheasant raced into our living room, followed by a small pack of boys who chased it round and round the room. We could only sit there open mouthed until the owner came and caught the bird. Then they all left and we had no idea who they were.

We’ve continued to feed the birds while in Austin. We sit at the kitchen table and watch them squabble over the food. The cardinals in their bright red plumage are the first birds to visit the feeders in the morning and the last ones at night. The humming birds come to the feeders on our back porch and if you are outside you can hear the high pitched whirring of their wings. A Carolina Wren has nested on the shelf in the porch.

One day we watched the young wrens leave the nest. They could barely fly but the parents called them continuously until they fluttered to the safety of the bushes.

One morning we woke up to find a screech owl bathing in our bird bath. Another day a great blue heron landed in a tree in our yard. He was coming to steal the fish from our neighbor's pond. On cold winter nights Horned Owls roost in the tall trees and hoot back and forth to each other.

Carol and I have had good times bird watching. One of the memorable times was when we visited Anahuac Preserve for the first time early on a foggy overcast morning. We saw rails, bitterns, ibis, and gallinules all in plain sight.

Another was when we stayed in a motel in Brownsville; each night almost 100 green Mexican parrots flew in to roost in the palm trees right outside our bedroom. These brightly colored birds squawked and squabbled until dark but then quieted down so didn't keep us awake as we had feared..

While we lived in Amarillo, I best remember the Sandhill Cranes migrating over our house in the spring and fall. First we heard their haunting calls and then looked up into the pale blue sky. Soon they would come into sight, in their strange, irregular, strung out flocks calling to each other as they passed over head. The sound had a mystical heavenly quality which produced in me a longing to be flying up there with them.

Given at Wildflower Church on October 5 2008 by Peter F. Knight.