

Pitchforks, Porchlights, and Hope

BY RICK WRIGHT, *WINGING IT* EDITOR

It's been two millennia now since Horace reminded us that though we throw nature out with a pitchfork, it just keeps coming back. The Roman poet meant *human* nature, of course, and his observation was a cynical one: leopards and spots, old dogs and new tricks. But knowing that doesn't stop me from understanding the aphorism in my own way.

Birders know that the Sonoran desert, in spite of its name, is a place full of life. In the summertime, that life can get a bit pushy. Cactus Wrens and kissing bugs wander in through open windows, spiny lizards and scorpions scuttle inside the front door. And every day I sweep great piles of twigs off the front porch and consider whether I should replace my broom with a pitchfork.

The White-winged Doves build their messy nests in the big mesquite, but the Mourning Doves, smaller, more trusting, and just as untidy, have taken a shine to the copper shade on our porchlight. My compulsive sweeping, and the regular traffic in and out the front door, is usually enough to discourage them. But as soon as I turn my back for a few days, nature comes back, and I return to find big dove eyes staring at me as if I were the intruder.

And so the porchlight stays dark for a couple of weeks, and we use the back door, and the mad flutter of wings takes years off the life of innocent UPS men. But it's all worth it when the reptilian faces of tiny doves peek over the edge of the nest, and we find hope in this demonstration that nature goes on without us, in spite of us.

There is hope on a different scale, too, in the good news that the Bald Eagle, that overburdened symbol, has recovered sufficiently to be removed from the federal endangered species list. Thanks to the efforts of hundreds, thousands of conservationists, the cessation of widespread poisoning, shooting, and harassment over the last 40 years has let the population grow to nearly 10,000 pairs in the lower 48. All it took was the will to put down our pitchforks.



Photo © Rick Wright

I worry, though, that that may not be enough to fight the conservation battles of the next half century. Just as the eagle was declared safe, the US Fish and Wildlife Service announced that 10 of the world's 17 penguin species were candidates for listing as threatened or endangered. We can stop overfishing and we can work to reduce marine pollution, but the rest may not be as easy as tiptoeing around Mourning Doves or letting Bald Eagles go unshot. The threat posed to our world and its birds by climate change may well require not that we lay our pitchforks down, but that we beat them into swords.

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