The grackle flocks settled on the treetops, one after another, until finally every bird had its place and they ceased moving. For several minutes more the harsh croaking and clucking continued, but finally they were silent under the gathering darkness. The sun had gone down, but the western sky was still alight, turning the begrackled tree line into a silhouette.

The next morning, they were gone. I didn't see another grackle for the rest of the season, just as it had been every fall since there was a pine tree next to a pond and grackles to return to it.

Identifying Dinner

It was summer, late afternoon. When the green frogs were uttering a few discordant twangs from The Pond across the road and the robins added their constant background chorus, when the Wood Thrushes in the wooded hills were just tuning up to their evening singing that would bring the sun down, and the bees were still humming lazily in the roadside flowers. There were other things in the roadside flora as well: butterflies. My younger sister Faith is the butterflyer. She was there, pointing them out as we walked down the road.

I was watching birds, of course. I didn't know many butterflies.

"Pearl Crescent," said Faith as something smallish and orangey went past.

"Oh," I said, lowering my binoculars, which had been focused on a wheeling shape, high above us in the azure sky and barely distinguishable through the heat waves (and the dirt on my binocular lenses). Just a Red-tail. Red-*shouldered* would have been a month bird...

Just then a large red-and-black butterfly flew past.

"Was that a Monarch?" I inquired.

"Great Spangled Fritillary," Faith replied, focusing her binoculars on another—different—large red-and-black butterfly.

"Is *that* a Monarch?" I asked again, eyeing the creature that she was watching. My sister examined at it. "Actually, I think it's a Viceroy."

Close. If I don't know what a butterfly is, then I just assume that it's a Monarch or some sort of weird little skipper thingy.

A grackle, being rather ferociously dive-bombed by an insane kingbird, swooped overhead, croaking its frustration at the circumstances in which it found itself. I guess, I mused, they don't call them "tyrant flycatchers" for nothing. The mobber's mate was hawking at the edge of The Pond, perched on an overhanging snag. I'd always suspected that they nested around here...

"Hey," said Faith suddenly, leaning forward. "What's that?"

"You mean that thing singing up on the hill? It's a Field Sparrow."

"No, the butterfly."

"Which butterfly? There're a bunch of them."

"That one," Faith replied somewhat impatiently.

"Oooh," I said, much enlightened. "Maybe it's a Monarch."

Faith ignored this possibility, probably on the grounds that the butterfly in question was about a third the size of a Monarch and sort of grayish, and plunged after her quarry. Having little else to do and not finding it a good idea to stand in the middle of the road instead, I followed. The thing flitted casually across the road and toward The Pond. Faith—checking, of course, for cars, trucks, tractors, opossums, and every other manner of thing that could run into someone crossing a country road—darted after it. I followed. I hate crossing roads. I always have the feeling that if I pause on the median to make sure that no Ivory-billed Woodpeckers are flying over without my notice, then I'll get hit by an enormous and rusty Ford F150.

The butterfly that Faith was pursuing dipped out of view for a second (causing my sister to panic) and then returned, landing nonchalantly on a teasel near the edge of The Pond.

"Gotcha," Faith whispered in relish as she focused her binoculars on the momentarily still butterfly. "It's a...wait, no it's not. I don't think I've ever seen a butterfly like this before."

"You have *too* seen Monarchs," I said.

"I know," said Faith through gritted teeth. "But this is *not* a Monarch."

The kingbird in the tree above us flew out and captured some hapless mosquito, then returned to the same perch to eat.

"I think," said Faith, "that it *could* be some sort of—"

I never did learn what sort of thing it was, for at that moment the kingbird swooped off its perch and caught the very butterfly that Faith had been watching. I can only imagine how it must have looked to my sister, whose binoculars were on the butterfly, when a relatively enormous bird swooped into her field of view and left with the object of interest.

The kingbird, presumably satisfied, soon left. We headed to the house for supper, and all the way back Faith cursed the kingbird roundly. "Dumb bird! I didn't even get to identify the butterfly before it got eaten! I don't think I've ever

seen one that *looked* like that! So it could have been a *lifer!*"

"You've seen Monarchs before," I reminded her.

Never Cry Hawk

The winter after I began birding was when I set up my feeding station. The first time a bird came to it—an impressive male cardinal—I was elated. When a Red-bellied Woodpecker came to the newly set up suet cage, I went into ecstasies. After a while, though, I got used to the initial thrill enough not to merely scream "Cardinal!" whenever I looked out the window at the feeders. I began not just looking at the birds, but at what the birds were *doing*.

Hitherto, this behavioral focus had not occurred to me. By golly, I was a birdwatcher and I would watch the birds, not what they were doing. But there is only so much staring blankly at a cardinal that one can do; therefore, I began to watch *what the cardinal was doing*. There is a fine distinction here. I didn't have books on avian behavior (I actually didn't know that such a thing existed), so I didn't know what to look for. I just observed.

What I saw I wrote down carefully in a composition notebook, and then I tried to puzzle out why the birds did that. I correctly interpreted most of the behavior that I noted, as I found out later, but admittedly there were some behaviors which I either couldn't figure out or which I deduced incorrectly.

There was one thing that kept me up at night, though. I sometimes saw chickadees give their alarm call, then scatter with the other birds. Sometimes there was a hawk, and sometimes there wasn't. I didn't have a problem with when there *was* a hawk—then it was perfectly understandable—but why the other times? Were the chickadees just keeping on their toes, so to speak? Or was there a hawk, and I just didn't see it?

I'll admit that it took me a while to figure it out, a while to notice that after the chickadees flew off with the other birds, they returned while the others were still hiding in bushes. The clever chickadees were "crying wolf"—tricking the other birds into thinking there was a hawk and then returning to eat in undisturbed peace before the other feeder patrons realized that they had been tricked.

Because the chickadees called the alarm when there actually *was* a hawk as well, I suppose it never occurred to the other birds that the chickadees might be fooling them. Or perhaps they suspected it, but didn't want to take any chances. I thought it was rather resourceful, an easy way for the chickadees to rid the feeders of larger birds so that they could get at the seed.

The behavior has also been reported for titmice, but I have never observed them doing it although they often dropped in after the chickadees had done their job. The titmice always seemed to know whether or not the chickadees were tricking them. I have no idea how they knew, but somehow they did. The paridae are a clever, clannish lot so maybe they were all in it together.

One cold morning in January, when all the birds were hungry after a night of sitting in a tree branch in below-zero temperatures, I went out to fill the feeders earlier than usual, then went back in and watched through the window as the seed disappeared under the mass of sixty or so Mourning Doves, a pair of Downy Woodpeckers, at least twenty cardinals, ten or so Blue Jays, uncountable numbers of sparrows of several different kinds, and who knows what else.

Then a chickadee, who was sitting on the nearby shed and waiting its turn, gave the alarm. The birds disappeared like only birds at a hawk-beset feeder can—including all the chickadees in the vicinity. In a couple of minutes four or five chickadees swooped into the feeders and began cracking sunflower seed with reckless abandon, holding the seeds in their toes and hammering them with their beaks. Occasionally they uttered *chick-a-dee-dee* calls as they did so, confident of their own safety since they had, in fact, seen no hawk.

I had put some study into this behavior and was thus fairly confident that the other birds would realize they had been duped and would return in anywhere from five to ten minutes. But meanwhile something happened that I hadn't expected, and I'm sure the chickadees didn't bet on it either.

Around the corner of the house came a Sharp-shinned Hawk. Its appearance was abrupt and unexpected. It was doubtless counting on surprise attack, which worked quite well.

The end of this story is probably already evident, but to those to whom it isn't, there was one fewer chickadee at the feeder that day, and a certain hungry Sharp-shinned Hawk was hungry no longer.

Onions, Anyone?

The robin skirted the patch of worm-eaten cabbages and entered the onions. My binoculars were actually focused on a flicker that happened to be some ten feet behind the robin, eating ants on the lawn, but I could hardly help but see what the robin did next: It took a firm grip on the protruding tips of an onion seedling and gave an almighty tug, uprooting the onion. I don't remember the reason why I lowered my binoculars, but if I hadn't, then the mystery of the onion-tugging robin would have been solved a good

deal quicker.

I thought no more about it until a friend of my parents reported that robins were doing the same thing to his onions. The only explanation he could think of right off, he said, was that perhaps the robins thought the onion tips were earthworms sticking above the ground. I considered that theory myself for a little, then banished it on evidence that if robins went around mistaking onion seedlings for worms they would starve in a short time.

Not to mention they'd have to have really bad eyesight.

Obviously there are not robins hopping around tugging onions that resemble worms until they fall over dead from starvation, nor are they extraordinarily far-sighted.

I watched the robins in the yard for days on end, hoping to see a repeat of the behavior, but not once did I see them tugging up grass or even wild onions, which very closely resemble the domestic type.

It was a dry summer and the ground was as hard as a rock, except for in the garden, which was weeded, dug up, and watered. Thinking that might have something to do with the odd behavior of the robins, I started keeping watch on the onion patch again. Sure enough, I observed several more plants being uprooted, but it was not until I put two and two together that I realized the purpose behind the seemingly senseless act.

The robins pulled up onion plants in the garden only where the soil was loose and where they were easy to uproot; and they pulled only on things sticking up out of the ground in potential earthworm habitat.

I suppose that you could say that the robins recognized the habitat as food-rich, which they probably did, but mistook the onion plants as the food, but such conjecture is disproved upon further consideration. How could something intelligent enough to know where to *find* a worm be stupid enough to mistake an onion—of all things—*for* the worm? Not that robins are the brightest bulbs in the pack, but they aren't dumb.

My conclusion was that the robins were eating the worms that they uprooted along with the onion. Sort of like hungry birds following a plow to eat the insects it digs up—only in the absence of continuously plowing plows, the robins had taken it one step further. This sounded perfectly plausible but prior experience with assumptions about bird behavior led me to run down to the garden waving my arms the next time I saw a robin pull up an onion plant so as to be sure that it had pulled up worms as well.

It had. There weren't many onions left for us that year, though. I tried watering the yard to bring the worms closer to the surface so the robins could reach them. (People in the country don't water their yards, so the neighbors thought I was weird. If they knew I was doing it for birds they would have thought I was even weirder.) The robins did pull some worms out of that bit of the yard, but they kept pulling up onions as well.

As the previously mentioned scenario suggests, the diet of *Turdus migratorius* does not include onions. It goes, however, very much beyond the earthworms that even the non-birder knows robins eat. They do eat plant material, an astonishing 80 percent of their diet consisting of such in autumn when insect prey is diminishing.

In spring when insects and earthworms are more available, then plant intake drops to only 20 percent. Besides earthworms, they eat caterpillars, flies, spiders, snails, and other kinds of "bugs", and I once saw one pick up a slug. I don't think it actually ate the slug, and I don't blame it. When disturbed, slugs emit a disgusting and unappetizing slime that would be enough to temporarily glue up any robin's beak. I have also seen a juvenile robin catch—and eat—deerflies as well as black ants.

Robins' methods of acquiring animal prey are as varied as the prey itself. Besides the onion episode, there is the much more common and well-known method of hopping around the lawn and pulling up worms. The hop, stop, and lunge behavior is similar to that of other visual ground feeders such as the plovers. When the robin pauses to search for worms it cocks its head to one side, staring intently at the ground. It is sometimes thought that this is because the robin is listening for worms, but the reason is that the position of the bird's eyes—on the sides of the head—prevents it from seeing directly in front of it (unless the object is farther away), hence the need to examine the ground in a sideways manner.

Another method employed, especially in woodlands, is sometimes called "bill-sweeping". The bird uses its beak to brush aside leaf litter and to eat what it uncovers, provided it's edible. Around our woodpile, the robins use a slightly different technique: They actually lift up pieces of bark and throw them aside to eat what's underneath. These pieces of bark are often half the size of the robins themselves. I have seen blackbirds do this as well, although they seem to do it more often than robins, and pick up pieces of bark that are oftentimes larger than the pieces that robins pick up.

I have never seen or heard of robins hawking, as their relatives the bluebirds do, although they do eat some flying insects. Apparently they don't catch them out of the air; the abovementioned juvenile robin snagged them when the insects landed within reach.

When animal matter is scarce, robins turn to fruit.

Around here their favorites are multiflora rose berries and staghorn sumac, and in the late summer and fall they eat a quantity of mulberries and blackberries. Pokeberries, poison ivy, and chokecherries are all on the robin menu here as well, eaten according to season when they are available. The first place we always see robins when they return in February is in the sumac tree, where a pair nests almost every year.

Even during the summer, when bird feeding slows down, harried and busy robin parents will eat feeder fare in between rushing around to feed gaping nestlings or dive-bombing a cat that's after a fledgling. They will eat apples, raisins, cherries, grapes, and similar food at feeders, but I've never tried offering them any of these. Around here they eat whole wheat bread, cantaloupe and watermelon rinds, soggy cereal, spaghetti, and pretty much anything else we chuck in the compost bin, as well as dog food and occasionally homemade suet put out for actual bird feeding reasons, but only rarely the latter as they seem to have trouble with the suet cages.

Yet another favorite food of the robin is watermelon. When available, they seem to favor it almost above earthworms. I don't blame them. So do I. Daniel Beard writes in *The American Boy's Handy Book* that "A robin the writer once owned would eat a large slice of watermelon down to the green rind in a single day."

So the old adage could go much further than just "the early bird gets the worm." The early bird gets the dog food, the sumac berries, the soggy cereal, and, yes, the worm. But I have yet to hear about the early bird that got the onion.

The Wrens and the Swallows

The Tree Swallow eggs should have hatched by now. I had been checking them for almost two weeks, and by the information on Tree Swallow nesting schedules I had gathered over the years, both from watching them and from other sources, their eggs hatch after about two weeks, 13–16 days to be exact, but usually tending toward thirteen days, although I once read that...

Back to the story.

As I pulled the stepladder up next to the tree where the nest box is, I was horrified to see chicken feathers—*bloody* chicken feathers—on the ground underneath the tree. Chicken feathers like the ones that lined the swallow's nest. *The chicken feathers that* had *lined the Tree Swallows' nest*. I remembered when the swallows had built the nest. Our neighbor owned a chicken, and that's where those feathers had come from. If the chicken didn't lose feathers often enough, then the swallows perched on its back and pulled more feathers loose. Seriously.

I bent down to examine the had-been lining of the Tree Swallows' nest and found, tangled in them, the remains of a swallow egg with a crushed hatchling inside.

With a sense of impending doom, I unfolded the ladder and set it up. Sure enough, two dead hatchlings and two crushed eggs were all that remained of what had been six intact eggs the previous day. "House Sparrows," I thought, giving one that happened to be flying over a nasty look. The year before last, House Sparrows had raided the swallows' box in much the same manner. I guess I never really forgave them for it, either.

I folded up the ladder and went inside to find my sparrow trap. It took a while. It was in the shoebox underneath the stack of *Birding* magazines, the box that was supposed to be holding socks but in reality had my Fort Steuben baseball cap, a pile of *Winging It* newsletters, and the extra rainguard for my binoculars.

The trap was inside the Fort Steuben cap.

I took the sparrow trap out and installed it in the nest box, then went smugly back inside to await victory.

After three or so hours, when I was sure the culprit was caught, I swaggered out to the shed, fetched the stepladder, dropped it on my toe, picked it back up, and finally managed to get it to the nest box tree without further incident. The door to the sparrow trap was not down. It's the Sheldon Miller type with the weight-activated perch on the inside, so that when the perch is perched on, a door swings over the entrance hole and traps the bird inside the nest box.

When I opened the nest box I discovered that *something* had arranged a neat pile of sticks underneath the perch so that it could be safely sat on without causing the door to swing down. I had to admit that whoever had done this was extremely intelligent, for a bird, as there is very little room to squeeze past the perch and arrange the sticks. The trap is so delicately set that even a strong gust of wind will sometimes cause the door to go down. I removed the sticks and set the sparrow trap up again. Later, when I checked again, the pile of sticks was again positioned in the same place as before, and nothing was caught. I will probably kick myself for the rest of my life for not getting photographic evidence of this.

I can't claim that the bird did this purposely, although the chances are good that it did. But I can still say with all truth that it did really happen.

And that House Sparrows don't use sticks, either to build nests or jam up sparrow traps.

House Wrens do, though. I mean to make nests. I've

never heard of one jamming up a sparrow trap. They will also kill other birds' eggs or nestlings to make way for their own. The conclusion: The wrens had killed the swallow brood so that they could use the nest box themselves; but the swallows were there first, so it was their box and I would see to it that the wrens would pay, and pay dearly.

They didn't deserve the nest box, right?

Exactly right.

So, although a little chagrined at not being able to blame my arch-enemies the sparrows, I cold-bloodedly set out to rid Nest Box #01 of House Wrens forever. Using tacks, I strung a thread net across the entrance hole. That, I thought, cackling with self-confidence, should keep them out.

They unwound the netting from the tacks, threw it out, and continued building their nest.

Evidently, these were no birdbrains. I had to admire them. But...

The swallows have nested in that box ever since I put it up. I like Tree Swallows. They are beautiful, graceful creatures that have taken flight to a high art. I had never felt one way or the other about wrens. For me, they were simply there. Now they were nest robbers. They were killers. Oh, of course I had *heard* that House Wrens would do that, but it is a different matter entirely if they do it to *my* Tree Swallows.

Suppose we don't look at it from a human's point of view. Who can fathom the mind of a wren? At best, one can assume that a wren does not feel remorse over the failure of the Tree Swallow's brood. Remorse and guilt are human emotions.

To the wren, the point of living is not dying. Every act of its day-to-day life is directed toward that end. Emotions would get in the way. Suppose a winter-starved hawk felt sorry for the equally winter-starved rabbit instead of killing it for food.

Perhaps the swallow's nest box was the only one around, or perhaps it was simply the one that the wren wanted. No matter that it was occupied—the wren simply killed the eggs and hatchlings. Instead of the swallow's nest box, it was the wren's nest box. Yes, it sounds brutal. Yes, it is brutal, by human standards.

But in the eyes of a wren, what is wrong and what is right? In the world of a wren, *is* there wrong and right? What does it think as it ends the life of a rival's nestling? Does it think anything? Do I, as the human observer who is responsible for the presence of the nest box, have the right to foil the wren's attempt to nest?

Do I?

The wrens are building their nest now. The female is starting the lining of straw in the deep cup constructed of twigs. The male is singing at the top of the nest box tree. There should be eggs soon...

Is it right for the wren to kill to make way for more life?

But who am I to pass judgment on a wren?