

Bird People

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My connection to birds stretches back generations. Mom's grandmother, Lillar, was a Native American of Cherokee heritage. Lillar used to net birds for Audubon in the West Texas rangelands.

My uncle, James Peacock, a master woodcarver specialized in transforming inanimate blocks of wood into lifelike birds, mainly waterfowl and shorebirds.

When a traumatic brain injury landed me in a wheelchair due to left-sided paralysis, it was no surprise that my emotional savior would be a tiny bird.

One side effect of my particular flavor of brain damage was uncontrolled, inconsolable crying.

For thirty consecutive days I was overwhelmed by wretched sobbing, dark days for me and mine. One sunny afternoon, I took my lunch on the wooden deck attached to the front of the house. This space is 40 feet long and 15 feet wide allowing me ample room to navigate in my wheelchair. Once outside, I immediately felt the relief, tranquility and calmness that only the outdoors can offer. While sitting basking in a sunbeam, I heard the most wonderful sound. One that would change my way of perceiving my new condition and provide me a way back to the outdoors I love.

Describing birdsong with words is similar to slicing bread with a hatchet. Ineffective. Often we're left with some simple clunky onomatopoeia that does nothing to convey the musical beauty and sense of peace that listening to birdsong brings.

The bird song I heard immediately calmed me down, clearing the cobwebs and confusion that had been dominating my thoughts since I first awoke in a hospital bed. Emotionally speaking, this song gently guided my tears away.

My healing bird warbled a melodic whimsical song whirling, fanciful soft musical notes wafting through the air delicate as snowflakes. Each time I heard this bird song, my emotional state settled into calmness. I had yet to identify this bird. Just a brief glimpse of it deep in the thick foliage of a towering Laurel tree. The bird was covered in shadow and I could not discern any specific colors other than it looked dark. I could see it was about 6 inches, stout, had an angular head, and a deep fork in its tail feathers. I became obsessed with identifying my whimsy bird. It became my white whale. Every day for two weeks I kept vigil with a guide book and a pair of binoculars. Each time I heard my bird I would quickly wheel about the deck trying to find a better spot in which I could see my bird.

I decided to get serious and I placed a bird feeder in my yard. The results were amazing. Songbirds started raining down into my front yard and I worked on honing my bird identification skills. Many of the birds I saw at the feeder had easily recognizable physical characteristics that made finding them in the guide straightforward: jays, juncos and cedar waxwings. Another week passed with no sighting of my mystery bird.

Early one morning, I heard the warble and there it was! High up in a tree bathed in bright sunlight perched my mysterious feathered biped. It wasn't dark at all. No, this bird was almost an iridescent purple with streaks under the tail coverts and along the back and head. With this new information I rifled through my guide and there it was hiding in plain sight on the page: the purple finch.

Several indigenous cultures of North America believe finches are symbolic of joy and happiness, and a harbinger of good fortune to come. Certainly two of three of these symbolic traits, joy and happiness, came through for me. This little purple friend got me hooked on birdwatching. My adventures have taken me out into my neighborhood to inventory the number of unique species I have living nearby. Additionally, I'm currently coordinating with a venerable local Conservation Organization to help them by participating in their annual shorebird count.

That purple finch positively impacted my mental well-being and has given me the courage to continue spending time thinking about and observing birds. Despite my limitations.

My current journey has shown me that I belong with birds!