

LOST IN THE MOMENT

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Sometimes while birding, time is suspended and we are lost in the moment, at one with a place and its birds. Last summer I found such moments on a suburban street adjacent to a corn field, in a nearby industrial park, and along a make-shift path on the periphery of a college campus. One tapped into the artist in me, the other into my intellect, and the last into the explorer in me.

The humid early morning August air bathed windows, early morning bikers, and walkers in moisture. I am out for a walk in the relative coolness before the heat combined with humidity will be all but unbearable. At the end of a small street that borders the condo in which I live there is part of a farm field that has rows of tall corn. What catches my eye is the contrast of the green husk with the pale yellow tassel on top; it is a sea of subtle color in an otherwise suburban landscape. There are about two dozen birds; male and female Red-winged Blackbirds, male and female House Sparrows and a few starlings in the corn. One female House Sparrow has a bill that glistens like an opaque seashell. Some of the others have a faint yellow on their breasts, which blends with the yellow tassel. Some birds perch fluttering their wings. One of the male Red-winged Blackbirds is bent in a yoga-like position possibly trying to eat corn.

I stand above street level on sloped grass, wiping moisture from my binoculars while peering down the rows of corn. Some birds, mainly House Sparrows are flying. I cannot really explain it but the scene delights me. Perhaps it transports me, somewhere in the recesses of my mind, to a place that I've never seen. A passerby on a bike looks at me and then over to the rows of corn but can probably see little at street level. If he had asked me what I like about this mundane scene all I would have been able to say is that it was dee-light-full! In this case being lost in the moment means being rendered temporarily inarticulate.

A few days later a morning walk through a nearby industrial park takes me through a large parking lot whose perimeter is bounded by undeveloped space with trees and brush. Flying onto a branch of a bare tree is a kingbird whose tail fans out as it lands, showing the telltale horizontal white bar at the tip. An insect, perhaps a butterfly, flutters madly in its bill. Because this bird is a tyrant flycatcher, I expect the insect to be dispatched quickly. What happened didn't follow from past observations nor unfold as described in anything I'd read.

The bird, wings fluttering wildly, goes from branch to branch with the insect in its bill. Once, it apparently drops the insect but flies off the branch and recaptures it. Finally the bird swallows the insect but now faces other difficulties. Two mockingbirds alternately fly at it. The kingbird moves to the other side of the tree where this time a sparrow flies at it. Finally a second kingbird joins the first and they perch in the tree for a while. One, then the other, flies off and they both disappear into the greenery and the gray sky. A little while later I see three of the kingbirds in a tree by a tan building. One flies off the tree pursuing a large insect. The kingbird doesn't get very close to its prey and goes back to the tree while the

insect flies toward me looking bigger and bigger. I'm smiling partly out of confusion.

I had first seen the kingbirds here about five weeks before, two adults and two juveniles. I watched their agility in flight, saw one nab an insect, a staple of their diet, and observed an adult feeding a juvenile on a few occasions. I also read about the propensity of kingbirds to chase larger birds, such as hawks and crows, that came into their territory. The ineptitude that I've just witnessed is apparently a case of juveniles learning to hunt. If it in fact is, this kingbird family may not yet be ready for the southern migration, which will probably be delayed, perhaps until mid September. In this case being lost in the moment means recognizing that what you see unfolding is not consistent with past observation and descriptions you've read, searching for an answer, and growing in the process.

On another warm and very humid August morning, this time on the campus of a New York State University campus a few miles from where I live. I'm looking for a place to take a group for a walk as part of a nature journaling workshop I will be doing here. On foot I followed a service vehicle down a no access road and up a hill where there is a large deserted grassy field. I watch a campus security car drive slowly around a dirt oval on the field's perimeter, which I judge to be about a mile. I start down the path on a voyage of discovery, which unfolds in a series of unexpected moments.

In a milky sky a Rock Pigeon flies back to a craggy bare branch. Gray poetry. Two bright yellow American Goldfinches perching on a branch fly off. Attempting to see some Barn Swallows through my binoculars, which have disappeared into the grass, my field of view is suddenly and completely covered with brown fluttering birds. It is a huge flock of starlings. Quite early for such large numbers. Their wings looked lighter than their bodies, giving them a two-toned appearance as they beat quickly, carrying them into trees on the edge of the field into which they vanish.

The birds come so fast my head feels like it's on a swivel. Is that a kingbird? Another one looks like a Brown Thrasher. Most of the way around the field the pace of the action has slowed to some sedate moments that have a quiet charm. In some tall grasses in a clump of flowers and wood chips, there are two pairs of House Finches. Because the male has a red/orange head and breast, which looks to me like it dipped itself in a jam jar, I call them "jelly heads." Moving on the grass stalks they blend in picturesquely with some sun-reddened leaves. Another bird with a light yellow neck, chin and breast, as supple as a bird's can be, is bent slightly around a grass stalk on which it perches. I continue watching and when the bird flies there is only a quick blur and a grass stalk left shaking.

A light drizzle has started as I sit on a yellow chair having a bite to eat outside under a red Coca-Cola umbrella. I'm coming down from the high experienced on the field. The symbolism of a yellow chair and a red umbrella makes me think of something I'd seen but little noticed. A brown form, with some faint yellow and a small red spot, had flown from a tree to the center of the field and landed on one of several short yellow pipes there. It was a flicker. What really is the difference between us, I thought. Out in the elements we both have perched on something yellow and had red on top, albeit the bird's color is built-in and mine is a temporary artifact. In this sense bird and human aren't so different after all. In this case being lost in the moment means that the feeling carries over long after the moment is gone.