

23 MINUTES OF MOOD

Michael Givant

17 Woodtree Drive, Woodbury, N.Y. 11797
givant@adelphi.edu

The temperature is in the 60s, the sky is gray and a light mist is beginning to fall. Days like this are heaven sent for my light-sensitive eyes. I can see colors, textures—really the whole landscape—better than I can in bright sun. Approaching the pond where I live, I focus my binoculars on the smooth-as-glass water covered with large islands of soaked willow leaves.

Suddenly, a kingfisher flies out and crashes into the water, then flies to a plump willow on the other side of the pond. There, partially hidden by a curtain of leaves, it has its snack. Five mallards are paddling about in the water. The pond and its denizens have just become my sole focus of attention and without realizing it I'm slipping into a subconscious mood of intense focus and pure serenity.

Some 60 yards away, partially hidden by the leaves of a willow tree, I spy what may be a branch—or is that the kingfisher? I inch my way across the front of the pond. From under a tree I have my best view. The form appears black and white with a dagger bill. No doubt about it, this is my guy. Or is it a female? Now the mist turns to drizzle and the willow tree under which I'm standing becomes an umbrella.

The kingfisher flies from the cover of its tree to a bare branch of another willow that hangs out over the water. It is the female. Her rust breast band is dark and the rust creeping out by her sides is light. The rich rust playing against the subtle charcoal gray is a study in contrast; she's a dusky beauty. At this pond, the kingfisher is the most difficult bird to see, but there's a better chance with this female as she is more active than her male counterpart. The kingfisher is my wife's favorite bird and she'll want a report. The spot on the branch where she perches is worn smooth, unlike the rest of the limb and the other branches whose old bark is moss-stained. This is an often-used perch, perhaps the kingfishers' favorite one. Odd how I've noticed this smooth spot before but never really saw it. The mood has heightened my awareness.

A lone mallard is swimming toward me leaving a V in the water. It soon stops. The duck is moving a seed ball around rapidly in its bill. The ball spills into the water where it floats; the mallard wants no part of it. Soon she approaches some tall bent reeds that have dried yellow seed clusters at their ends. She pecks at two of them but wants no part of them either; perhaps their texture is too rough. She now comes up on the grass so close to me that I can't focus binoculars on her. And I can't take my eyes off her either. The bill is so dark, the eyes and demeanor so trusting. With the naked eye, the neck is thinner and the body smaller than when seen through binoculars. There are tiny clear raindrops on her back, recalling the proverbial "like water off a duck's back".

The mallard paddles away and my eyes fall on new grasses just starting to grow in the water. The serene mood, which has come over me unawares, now reaches through to conscious thought. Leaning on the fence, looking out over the pond just staring at everything, I'm aware that my inner being has suddenly slowed. A silent voice in me says "What more could you ask for on a day like today?" But more is coming.

Suddenly the form of a large bird appears over the pond. At first it looks to be a great blue heron, but no—guess again. The bird, a Canada Goose, starts to circle over the pond. The aspect of long wings, bulky body and sharply angular webbed feet descends lower and lower toward me. Not many of these guys frequent the pond. The goose lands and dips its long neck in the water, then begins to make a continuous sound like it is calling another. That other never comes, and the sound is the only one I hear besides an occasional passing car. The calling becomes soft background music in my half-dreamy, half-focused world.

Now real raindrops start to fall: through the tree to my hair, to my scalp and the shoulders of my tee shirt. The rain would have caused a clear thinking person to leave. But not one in my mood. From a distance, the falling drops on the water look like hail. The closer ones raise high clear bubbles. Now the rain turns serious, pelting the pond and covering it with ripples. I don't even feel myself getting wetter.

The mallard has gone over towards the calling Canada Goose and seems to be trying to feed in its wake. Another duck has joined it and they both paddle away, their broad beams receding like slow moving tugboats. On the far shore, what looks like a yellowlegs flies in. My binoculars are covered with rain and I can't be sure. I'm getting really wet now. Rationality takes my hand and I reach for my plastic bags, carried from a nearby farm stand. But my dusky kingfisher's not going anywhere, nor are the mallards. Why should I? The silent voice inside me says, "these are birds and they've got feathers, you don't." The same voice says "OK, stay a minute more and then get outta here." In that minute the rain starts to abate. The Canada Goose takes off and flies over the trees.

The kingfisher now makes it easy for me to leave. She turned around a few minutes ago, always her prelude to leaving. Now she's winging it halfway across the pond, now disappearing into the recesses of a fat willow tree. At least she has the sense to get out of the rain. The voice in my head wishes her good-bye and says, "I'll be back to enjoy you again." With my main attraction gone I get ready to leave, but first I check my watch. It's been 23 minutes since I got here; 23 minutes of pure subliminal mood. It seems longer. I savor the time for the rest of the afternoon. My wife is thrilled about the discovery of the perch and the chance to catch a glimpse of the birds again. Several days later, now in bright sunshine, I look at the smooth spot on the branch where the kingfisher perched. Suddenly this ordinary place feels like a special sanctuary. 23 minutes of mood.