

KILLERS AND LANDMARKS

It's September, nearly six months since we've been locked down. So whom do you commune with when your normal modes of socializing are cut off? I know I'm not the only one who's become more attuned to the animals.

I spend a good part of each day now observing two birdhouses and a feeder outside the window. These have brought into our lives previously unnoticed dramas: particularly the nearly insatiable mating of a couple of house sparrows who have produced three broods of shrieking, yellow-beaked infants who need to be fed twelve hours a day. Watching these babies reluctantly emerge from their nests — often trying to return — has been an arresting spectacle that's made me wonder about the limitlessness of parenthood and whether it's possible to discern the countenance of a female bird's face. I watch the male sparrow immediately mate with the beleaguered-looking mother who, only hours before, wrapped up a two-week-long feeding cycle and saw her fledglings finally fly away. The poor, exhausted bird looks at her puffed-up male mate with a face that says: *Enough already.*

Deer provide another distraction. During the hottest days, Lynn has carried water along with dubious leftover food (should deer really eat hotdog rolls?) to a wooded area near the cathedral where she's come upon gatherings of speckled fawns arrayed in the evening light, as if waiting to be painted. This is more than slightly hypocritical since at the same time she's been spraying deer-repellent on the phlox and hosta in our yard in order to keep them away. The label on the deer-repellent tells me it's made from coyote urine, and I keep thinking of the poor slob whose job it is to collect the urine. I imagine him holding a collection jar, walking his coyote on a leash, pleading, "C'mon, Wile E., pee for daddy! Good boy! *Pee!*"

And then there is the arcane domain of insects: Who knew (or *wanted* to know) about cicada-eating wasp — also known, ominously, as the Eastern cicada killer? (Maybe you've seen his picture on the post office wall: unshaved, yellow-and-black kerchief, long scar on his thorax.) These sinister-looking, three-inch creatures burrow underground chambers for their unborn infants whom they provision with paralyzed cicadas. Loose dirt mounds along the sidewalk mark their relentless mating and mining.

Chipmunks are a more welcome distraction. It's not clear whether there are one or 20 of these charming rodents in my garden, but, in any case, they seem pleased for me to admire their vivid stripes—rotating 360 degrees, like movie stars posing for a screen test. Lynn admitted to being secretly interested in trying to domesticate one of them, but our dog, Nellie, has been less than agreeable.

Speaking of Nellie, during this quarantine she's developed new behaviors: whimpering when we eat, sulking if we go outdoors without her, and producing a kind of chimpanzee-like chatter whenever she wants anything else — usually renewed attention. Her canine good looks and charm have made her significantly better known in the neighborhood than

we are. A few weeks ago, Lynn was riding her bike and found herself on a street she'd never seen before. A postal truck pulled up in front of her, and out came Park, our mailman during the previous year who had now been reassigned. Lynn walked up to him and said, "Hi, I don't know if you remember me, but I'm a little lost." She could see by his face that he didn't have a clue who she was, especially in her oversized helmet. "I'm trying to get back to Elm Avenue." He still looked confused. Then she remembered how charmed he'd been with Nellie, who charged out whenever he arrived, letting him pick her up with his blue latex gloves. He had even kissed her paws. "I need to go to Nellie's house," Lynn tried, thinking how silly this sounded.

"Oh, Nellie!" he said, and his previously impassive face broke open in a smile. "Turn right at the corner then two blocks and left."

When Lynn arrived home, Nellie was standing in the doorway waiting for her, wearing a certain prideful look, as if to say, "Nobody may know who you are, but I'm a landmark."