

Birdsong

Ronald Bayne

We look before and after,
We pine for what is not;
Our sincerest laughter
With some pain is fraught;
Our sweetest songs are those that tell of saddest thought.

— Percy Bysshe Shelley, "To a Skylark"

A "birder" is not the same as a bird lover. Although my sister claims to have a great interest in bird life, she would not travel any distance to see a new or rare species, as true birders do. But she declares a great love of birds, that is, some birds. Those she does not love, she hates with a passion. Swallows and martins are her favourites. English sparrows and starlings she loves to hate. They are foreigners to North America and should be restricted. And she acts on her convictions.

Some years ago, I invited a noted British geriatrician to speak to physicians in Sherbrooke, Que., on the subject of geriatric rehabilitation. Her flight from London arrived in Montreal in the early morning, so I took her to my sister's house near the airport for coffee. As we approached the house, we saw my sister leaning out of an upstairs window. She was beckoning and whispering. "Is it in there?" she said, pointing to a birdhouse just outside the window. I could see a small brown head in the opening and signalled that it was. My sister pulled on a string that she held in her hand and caused a small door to slide across the opening, trapping the bird. Then she unhooked the birdhouse and plunged it into a bucket of water. She explained to my astonished visitor that this was the only way to reduce the sparrow population and reserve her birdhouses for swallows. She had an alternative method to the bucket of water, one that saved her the trouble of unhooking the birdhouse. This was to hold a plastic bag over the opening and slide open the trap door. The bird shot out into the bag. Then it was simply a matter of tying the bag over the exhaust pipe and starting the car engine.

My sister and her husband bought a farmhouse in eastern Ontario, where my sister set up many houses for tree swallows. She extended her restricted housing policy to include protection against marauders. One day she noticed a weasel looking out of one of the swallow houses. Quickly placing her hand flat across the opening, she unhooked the swallow house and returned to the farm to plunge it in a bucket of water. However, she forgot that there was no trap door and removed her hand. In a flash, the weasel leaped out of the bucket and disappeared into a small flower bed. Standing guard over the flower bed, my sister called on her husband to bring the shotgun. Then she slowly shuffled through the flowers until the weasel appeared at her husband's feet. "Shoot, shoot!" she shouted, as the weasel hurriedly retreated under the leaves toward her. "I can't, I might shoot you," he said. "I don't care," she replied. "Shoot anyway!" But he lacked her determination.

Although my sister had as many as 60 swallow houses on the farm, she was disappointed that she was not able to attract any martins to her multi-apartment martin house. In Montreal, she had had martins for many years. She decided to help the martins leave Quebec, as so many anglophones were doing at the time, and find accommodation in Ontario. One evening in Montreal, when all the martins had returned to their nests, each pair in their own apartment, she climbed a ladder that she had previously put in place and plugged each opening. Then she unhooked the birdhouse, placed it in the car and drove to the farm. There, she climbed a ladder and fixed the birdhouse onto a post in its new location. Shortly after dawn, she climbed up and removed the plugs. The martins streamed out and circled around the house, higher and higher, until they discerned the city of Montreal. Unlike the anglophones, they headed back to Quebec, "leur pays, leur vraie patrie."

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