



Stark's Reality

For the Birds

by Thom Stark

I'm really going to miss the hummers.

Before we moved to Mariposa, I wasn't very big on birdwatching. Perhaps the fact that, in El Cerrito, where my wife and I lived for 20 years before moving here, the avian population of our neighborhood mostly consisted of wrens and sparrows -- both little brown birds with neither beauty nor musical ability to boast of -- along with the occasional crow or blackbird and the damned, defecating pigeons and sea gulls accounts for my lack of interest in birding.

So, other than being dive-bombed by nesting blackbirds in Springtime -- the feisty little things are intensely territorial and they tend to nest on top of streetlights and power poles -- there wasn't much to interest me in El Cerrito's bird life. Mariposa, however, is another story.

Here, there are lots of interesting feathered things. There are the quail, for instance, who pace along in a straggling skirmish line with their silly, question-mark combs bobbing over their heads as they browse among the grasses for crawling and wriggling things. When something disturbs them, the whole covey -- as many as a couple of dozen birds -- will suddenly burst into the sky in an explosion of wings that's quite startling the first hundred times you experience it, especially at night. They wait until the perceived threat of your presence is imminent, you see, and so there's this abrupt flurry of frantically-beating wings in the quiet darkness, no more than ten or fifteen feet away from you.

There are plenty of avian predators, raptors and scavengers here, too. Kites and vultures, red- and brown-tailed hawks, huge ravens, and stalking egrets. And owls: both the classic, hooting barn variety and the unearthly screech owls, splitting the darkness with their harsh, urgent voices. Once, last year, there was a fire just over the ridgeline from us and, afterward, the cloud of circling scavengers literally darkened the sky -- and, when I drove past the Chapline's arena at dusk, the trees were all crowded with them; every branch drooping under the weight of their hulking, dark forms.

There are a dozen varieties of woodpecker, too. Their triphammer drilling riddles every dead and dying tree, every stump and fallen log and, eventually, the surface of every wooden building. And then there's the eagle that likes to roost in the lightning-blasted bull pine in what we've always thought of as our South pasture (although we've never been able to afford the horses that would have made it a pasture in reality). I always thought it was a golden eagle, but, when my friend Bill Panzer came to visit, he went away so impressed by the bird that he made it a point to look it up in an Audubon book and, lo!, he became convinced that it was a juvenile bald eagle, instead.

There are so many, many other species, too -- ones that I couldn't begin to identify by name -- everywhere I look. And, of them all, my absolute, all-time favorites are the hummingbirds.

There are at least a than half-a-dozen species that hang around these parts at one time or another. The Anna's Hummingbird lives here year-round, while the others mostly pass through during Spring, Summer and Fall on their way from somewhere else to another place. And every one of them is magical.

They live their lives at incredible speed. Airborne, their hearts beat 1200 times a minute and their thirst for fuel is incredible. That's why, at dawn and in the late afternoon during the peak season, I regularly see as many as a dozen at a time around each of our three feeders -- and it's also why we go through a five-pound sack of sugar in less than a week. But the expense and the hassle of keeping them fed is well-rewarded by the sight of one of the little guys, its hunger sated for the moment, backing in mid-air to get out beyond the roof overhang, then rising straight up into the oak tree across the driveway, as if levitating.

Utterly magical.

Of all the many glories of this beautiful place, I will miss them the most -- but, sadly, it looks as though we will soon have no choice but to sell our little doublewide mobile home and the five-and-a-half acres of oak trees, rocks, and gopher holes that surround it and leave Mariposa.

They call economics "the dismal science" and, with the dotcom boom busted and the publishing industry stricken as if by plague, our personal numbers are bleak, indeed. Judy now makes seven dollars an hour -- twenty-five cents more than minimum wage -- with no benefits of any kind. No health insurance, no retirement, no nothing. Not so much as a day of paid vacation. Her prospects of any better employment are poor, because -- outside of highly-coveted County jobs -- Mariposa has nothing better to offer. And everywhere I have looked for work in my own field, the story has been the same: "Our page count is shrinking. We're overstocked with features and we're cutting columnists. Sorry. Times are just really bad right now."

So we're going to have to give up our health insurance, because we can't afford \$576 a month -- almost \$7000 a year -- even though we both have pre-existing illnesses and will play merry Hell getting coverage re-established if and when our fortunes turn around. And that sacrifice will merely delay the inevitable reckoning. Unless I can find steady work, or the miracle happens and Judy is hired by the County Library -- despite 100 competing applicants -- by year's end, when both income and property taxes are due, the balancing act will come to an end.

We will have to say "goodbye" to this place we've come to love so much, cut our losses, and go somewhere where there are jobs -- and traffic, and crime, and all the urban fears we thought we'd permanently left behind.

And where clouds of hummingbirds will crowd around our porches, chattering as they jockey for a place at the feeders, only in my memory.