Nature essays and observations – 2020-2025

Ulli Diemer

Longing for freedom and grieving loss: Reflections on watching swifts on a summer evening

The chimney swifts lured me outside again this evening. I'd already been out for one walk, but my door was open, and hearing their calls pulled me out in search of them, as it so often does. They're active in the evenings in my neighbourhood, and going for a walk in the summer pretty much guarantees that you'll hear them, though seeing them is not always quite as easy.

The tricky thing about seeing swifts is that you hear them, look up to where the sound came from, and they aren't there. These are birds that can fly 100 km/hour, so if it takes you a half a second to look up, they can already be 100 metres away. They are called swifts for a reason.

Swifts are mysterious birds, enigmatic and paradoxical.

In a sense, they are supremely urban birds, at least during the summer, having adapted themselves to nesting in chimneys a long time ago, though once upon a time they nested in hollow trees. Centuries of logging pretty much eliminated that option, and now they live among us, though as old chimneys get capped or disappear, so do their options for nesting sites. Common swifts and Alpine swifts, the species found in Europe, Africa, and the Mediterranean, have been nesting in human-built structures for thousands of years. A swift colony in the Western Wall in Jerusalem has been there for more than 2,000 years: the land has seen enormous changes, but every spring, without fail, the swifts arrive and claim their nests.

Yet unlike other urban birds, swifts have nothing to do with us. They don't interact with us or hang out in our vicinity in the way that we are used to other birds doing. They don't perch in trees or on wires, they don't land on the ground or at a birdbath. They can't: swifts are so uniquely evolved to a life in the air that they have shed features characteristic of most of the birds we know. Their feet only allow them to cling to vertical surfaces like bricks or trees. That is sufficient for their purposes, because they spend such a small part of their lives down in our terrestrial world.

It isn't quite true to say that swifts are all wing, but they come as close to it as it is possible to be. By way of comparison, the biggest wings of any bird belong to the Wandering Albatross, a bird much bigger than a swift, with a wingspan of about 10 feet. However, if an Albatross wanted to match the wing-to-body-weight ratio of a swift, it would have to have a wings that are 300 feet across.

In old Persia swifts were called "wind-eaters." The name reflected the mystery of these birds, which seemed to live in the air, never coming down to eat or rest.

We now know that their diet consists of aerial insects, invisible to us on the ground. The other mystery, of why, outside the nesting season, they never seem to come down to the earth, has been answered only recently, and the answer to that question has merely unveiled new mysteries.

Just a few years ago, it became possible to develop tiny sensors light enough to be attached to the wings of swifts (Common swifts and Alpine swifts) banded during the nesting season. The data from the sensors showed that, astonishingly, the old legends were true.

When they aren't nesting, *these swifts really do live in the sky*. After leaving their breeding sites in the early fall, Common swifts and Alpine swifts were found to spend upwards of 200 consecutive days in the air *without ever coming down to earth*. Not only do they eat, socialize, and mate in the air, they even sleep in the air. At night, they'll go up several thousand feet to catch a favourable wind current, and then, it seems, they sleep on the wing.

More recently, research on first-year swifts has expanded the picture. First-year birds don't mate, so there is no need for them to return to nesting sites in the spring. Young Common swifts outfitted with sensors have been found to spend 300 days or more in the air without coming down to the earth. Occasionally one will come down for a night to escape a storm, but others were found to remain continuously aloft for 10 months. Swifts are estimated to fly at least 200,000 km a year, and since they can live more than 20 years, they will fly several million kilometres during their lifetimes.

It turns out that swifts aren't the only birds capable of sleeping while they are flying. Great Frigatebirds have been found to remain in the air, above the ocean, for a month or two at a time, without ever landing (unusually for seabirds, frigatebirds can't land on water).

How swifts and frigatebirds can sleep while flying remains a matter of speculation. One theory is that somehow half of their brain falls asleep while the other half remains awake. Whales and dolphins have evolved similar adaptations. They need to sleep, and yet they have be aware of their surroundings and of potential danger, and they need to wake up in order to come to the surface and breathe. They do it by shutting down only one-half of their brain at a time.

Remarkable as they are, what makes swifts so special to me is not their astonishing biological adaptations, but what they seem to represent.

Earthbound as I am, my options for going places further constrained by a pandemic, I long for their freedom to fly wherever they desire. Theirs appears as the ultimate freedom: soaring far above the earth, as long as they please, going where they please, yet never alone, because they are always with others of their kind, chattering wherever they go.

Most birds embody unattainable freedom to some extent. The robin that comes to my birdbath looks at me with its bright eyes as I look at it: two vertebrates, each of us standing on two legs, facing each other, and for a moment I feel a sense of what we share. Then, in an instant, and with no apparent effort, it takes to the air, and I am left standing on the ground, keenly aware of what it is able to do that I can never share.

Swifts have taken to the sky and liberated themselves from the surface of the earth more than any other bird, and that very fact is part of the reason for the emotional attachment I feel for them. I don't mind that it is unrequited love: I know they don't even know I exist, and that's fine.

There are other birds that have also come as close as possible to severing their ties with the land, in a different way. Ancient murrelets, seabirds that live in the north Pacific, also need to come ashore to lay their eggs, which they do in burrows on the forest floor on Haida Gwaii and a few other locations. As soon as the eggs hatch, the parents leave and return to the sea. From the shore, they call to their chicks, and the tiny day-old chicks rush along the forest floor on their wobbly little legs, to where their parents are calling from. Another mystery, another example of birds' ability to do things that we don't even understand, is that each chick is able to distinguish the calls of its own parents. Once reunited, they swim farther out into the ocean, where their parents

will feed them. Ancient murrelets spend less time on land than any other bird. I have never seen one, but I am happy to be able to share the planet they live on.

I have been lucky enough to see sea turtles, and their newly hatched young, on the Nicoya Peninsula in Costa Rica. Sea turtles' sole tie to the land is also the need to lay their eggs. The young head straight for the water as soon as they hatch and remain there throughout their lives until eventually, guided by their own mysterious sense of direction, the surviving adult females swim through thousands of miles of ocean to return to the same beach they came from to lay their own eggs. Their vast world is also one that I can never be part of, and yet in some vicarious way, in my imagination, I claim a small share of their freedom.

I have felt the same way on the occasions I have encountered whales, including one humpback off Newfoundland which swam back and forth underneath and beside our boat, evidently curious about us and what we were doing. It was free to go where it wanted, and yet it took a few minutes to hang around and engage in some human-watching. We felt very privileged.

The natural world is very important to me, and a source of happiness, and for that reason it is also, in these times, a source of pain and grief. Chimney swifts are supremely adapted to a life in the air, and extremely independent, but their numbers, like those of all aerial insectivores, have been declining precipitously. The one thing they cannot adapt to is human-caused destruction of their food supply and nesting sites. Sea turtles have lived in the oceans for 100 million years, but now their survival is threatened by oil slicks, plastics, industrial fishing, beach 'development' and the warming of the oceans.

It is not just a few species that are at risk. Plankton, insects, trees, and everything that depends on them: the whole web of life from the smallest to the largest is showing signs of unraveling.

The calamities that are besetting our world have many faces: greed, short-sightedness, militarism, racism, sexism, endless growth – and they all have one name: Capitalism. The source of the problem, and the hope of a solution, lies with our own species: simultaneously the most intelligent, and the most stupid, of all the creatures living on this earth.

The natural environment I am most at home in is a forest. I have spent countless hours in forests, but I have never seen a wolf, though I have heard, and been thrilled by, their distant howls. Even though I never see them, it is important to me to know that they are somewhere out there in the forest, wild and free. I yearn for them to be there long after I am gone. Yet I am afraid that they, and countless other species, including many whose names I don't even know, may soon disappear from the earth. Knowing this, knowing that we are losing the battle – though it is not lost, and I keep fighting – is a source of profound grief.

Ulli Diemer
June 23, 2020

Strange Sounds Up in the Trees

I'm sitting out back reading (Uncle Tungsten, by Oliver Sacks) but I find I'm being distracted by the sounds coming from up in the trees above my head. Usually I have some idea of what I'm hearing from up above – swifts, robins, cardinals, sparrows, squirrels, cicadas later in the summer – but these sounds I can't place. They're just weird: a combination of whistles, clacking sounds, chuckling, rattling, in no particular sequence that I can make out, and certainly not musical.

Finally I grab my binoculars and have a look. Two birds, darkish. It's not so easy to recognize a bird when it's 30 feet up and you're directly below it. Not for me, anyway. Hmmn, yellow bills. Aha: starlings. Since they have yellow bills, I presume they are adults, since the young have dark bills. They're sitting on separate branches, but occasionally one hops onto the branch the other is on. Some kind of mating behaviour? That seems possible, but they don't seem to be actually *doing* anything.

I look them up. My Peterson guide says they are "garrulous." That they are. Another bird book tells me that starlings are "monogamous," their version of monogamy being that they stick with one partner until they pick a new one. Yeah, OK.

So maybe they're discussing the pros and cons of raising another brood? Or maybe they just enjoy sitting around making weird noises? I don't know.

This seems to be the story of my life: I see things, but I don't really know what's happening, or why. It wasn't always like this: when I was 20, I knew everything. Since then, life has been a constant journey of discovery: that is, discovering how much there is to know, and how little I know.

The mosquitoes drive me inside. Back to Oliver Sacks.

Ulli Diemer
June 6, 2020

An evening paddle

Went canoeing on the Humber River with a friend yesterday evening. We paddled the river and explored the marshes. Saw egrets, great blue heron, grebes, wood ducks, mallards, Canada geese, mute swans, red-winged blackbirds, swallows. Cormorants, gulls, and terns were diving for fish. A highlight was a kingbird nest in a branch above the water, the young with their mouths wide open, the busy parents flying back and forth bringing them insects.

That's one of the wonderful things about being in a canoe: you can go places you can't approach in a car or even on foot, moving quietly or staying still in one spot. Life slows down, and you can breathe.

Ulli Diemer
July 8, 2020

Butterfly

Standing on the front walk with my neighbour, I'm trying to find words, but what is there to say? Her daughter died yesterday. In the face of her grief, I have nothing to offer except my presence and feeble words of sympathy.

It wasn't so long ago that we were standing on this same spot: I was the one who had lost my beloved, also to breast cancer, and my neighbour was trying to find words of comfort.

My neighbour knows, as do I, that life and death, love and grief, walk hand in hand. She is 92 years old, her husband died more than 20 years ago, and still, every Valentine's Day, she visits his grave.

Lives end, but life goes on. When she goes back inside, I see a Monarch butterfly flitting around the milkweed plants in the front yard. I hope she is looking for a spot to lay her eggs. A woman is walking by with her young daughter. They stop: the mother points to the butterfly and the milkweed and explains what is happening. The daughter is listening and watching intently.

I smile, despite my sadness. Life goes on.

Monarch Butterfly. Photo by Miriam Garfinkle.

Ulli Diemer
July 9, 2020

The intelligence of ravens and the foolishness of (some) humans

There is something special about ravens. I am always pleased when I encounter them on my wanderings, partly because they make me feel, as Dorothy might say, “Ulli, we’re not in Toronto anymore!”

I am far from alone in feeling that there is something special about them. Ravens feature in the mythology and folklore of many cultures, from North American indigenous peoples to ancient Greek and Celtic legends. They are seen as creators, as destroyers, as tricksters, as harbingers. They can be all those things, because they are complex, adaptable, and highly intelligent.

Knowing my fondness for birds, several people drew my attention to a recent study of the intelligence of ravens, reported in *Scientific American*, which concluded that “Young Ravens Rival Adult Chimps in a Big Test of General Intelligence.”

I’ve frequently taken pleasure in hearing about and observing how smart ravens and their Corvid relatives are. But this kind of study bothers me.

The first thing that troubles me is the idea that it’s OK to lock up animals in cages and make them perform tricks to test their intelligence or observe their behaviour. Ravens are wild birds meant to live in the wild. If they choose to interact with humans, as they sometimes do, that’s one thing. Caging them against their will so that a few academics can advance their careers by publishing yet another paper, is another thing entirely.

Another thing that bothers me is that studies of this kind continue to propagate the idea that intelligence is a single quantity, a thing that can be measured and quantified. This idea has a long and ignoble history. In the 1800s, cutting edge science in this field consisted of measuring skulls, and later, measuring actual brains. The bigger the skull, so the theory went, the more intelligent the owner of the skull must have been. The measuring was done by white males, and – wouldn’t you know it – it turned out that white males had the biggest skulls, and therefore were at the top of the intelligence ladder, while people who weren’t white – and of course women – had smaller skulls and therefore weren’t as bright. Brain measurements produced similar conclusions (thanks, in part, to outright falsification and cheating, as Stephen Jay Gould documented in *The Mismeasure of Man*). It apparently did not occur to the brain quantifiers to extend their conclusions about intelligence to elephants, whose brains weigh around 5 kg, or to sperm whales with their 7.8 kg brains, vs. 1.5 kg for the average adult human.

In the twentieth century, measuring intelligence became the domain of psychologists and psychometrists, who developed the Intelligence Quotient (IQ), which assigns a numeric value to human intelligence. The early decades of IQ testing are also a history of racism and misogyny. Gradually the field has cleaned up its act, and overtly racist and anti-female ideas have been driven to the squalid fringes of the field, though systemic racism remains an inevitable part of the enterprise.

What also persists, no matter how often it is debunked, is the idea the intelligence can be quantified and measured, and that people or animals can be ranked in intelligence according to how they perform on tests designed by humans.

There is of course such a thing as intelligence. We can recognize and appreciate intelligence, in humans and in other animals. Some of us – I include myself – even find intelligence erotic (more in humans than in birds, to be sure).

But it is a serious error to think of intelligence as a single entity, or a cluster of individual entities, which can be measured, quantified, and ranked.

When it comes to other complex multi-faceted qualities, such as literature and writing, we are less included to make this mistake. We might think that William Shakespeare is a better writer than Edward Bulwer-Lytton, or that *The Picture of Dorian Gray* is a better book than *Fifty Shades of Grey*, but few of us would attempt to measure and quantify the difference between them. We haven't developed standardized tests for good writing, and we haven't developed a GWQ (Good Writing Quotient). Most of us would recognize this as absurd. (If someone has in fact done this, please don't tell me: I don't think I could bear to know.)

Studies like the one reported in *Scientific American*, which professes to compare the intelligence of ravens and chimpanzees, all proceed from the assumption that intelligence is a single quality, a *thing*, which can be tested for and measured.

But this fundamentally misconstrues the nature of intelligence. There are many different kinds of intelligence, and many different aspects to each kind. Reading the weather and the land, an ability which enabled indigenous peoples to make life-and-death decisions and survive in challenging and fast-changing environments, is a form of intelligence. Reading a piece of music, and understanding not merely what the notes say, but what the essence of that piece of music is and how it should be played, is a very different form of intelligence. Having a sense of where in a scientific puzzle the solution might lie is different yet. Different again is the emotional intelligence required to intuit how to respond to another person in distress. One could come up with many other examples; the point is that intelligence is not a single quality, but a whole complex of different qualities which may be present in different forms and degrees in different people. It is a fundamental fallacy to think these qualities can be reified into one entity called "intelligence." It is a further fallacy to think that that this imaginary entity can be measured.

And it is yet another fallacy to imagine that our idea of what constitutes intelligence can be meaningfully measured in non-human animals like ravens by making them perform stupid tricks like identifying under which cup a treat is hidden. Intelligence is species-specific. Ravens have demonstrated their intelligence surviving and thriving in a harsh environment for literally millions of years. Their lives have their own demands, and they have performed splendidly in rising to those demands.

They should be left alone to do what they are meant to do, not imprisoned in cages to do tricks designed by humans.

And we humans need to develop the intelligence to recognize what can't be measured, and when to leave well enough alone.

Ulli Diemer
April 13, 2021

Raven, Norris Point, Newfoundland. Photo by Ulli Diemer

White-throated Sparrow

I've been hearing a white throated sparrow out back for the last couple of days. They have been stopping over in the backyard (in downtown Toronto), for a few days every spring for as long as I can remember, certainly more than a decade. It seems a bit mysterious: can they live that long? Do they migrate with their young and tell them: 'Remember this place: it's a good place to stop?'

They seem to be arriving earlier. Last year, they were here on May 3. In 2016, it was May 10. I hope that's OK; they need to be synchronized with their food sources: insects, seeds, berries.

I've also learned that some of them have developed a new variation of their song. It was first heard in B.C. in 1999 (I guess cultural innovation often starts on the west coast), and started to be heard in Ontario five years ago. I'm not good enough to be able to tell if this one is singing the old song or the new variation.

I just know that I'm pleased when I hear them: a brief but precious visit.

Ulli Diemer
April 29, 2021

World Bonobo Day

February 14 is World Bonobo Day. Bonobos are close relatives of chimpanzees, and the choice of February 14, Valentine's Day, to honour them is no coincidence. Bonobos are the world's sexiest primates, who live according to the philosophy "make love, not war." Unlike their big-brained relatives, chimpanzees, gorillas, and humans, bonobos have been smart enough to develop a culture that is free of violence.

They are living proof that the claim of socio-biologists that all great apes, including humans, are genetically pre-disposed to be violent and wage war, is wrong. Bonobos have found another way: touching, caressing, and sex. Especially sex. As Susan Block says "These loving, sensuous apes have as many kinds of sex as humans do, in a veritable Bonobo Sutra of positions, including face-to-face, with multiple partners and in all combinations, as bonobos are bisexual or pansexual." "But it's not just how they have sex that makes bonobos so important, especially to humans. It's how they use sex: for barter, friendship, stress-relief, anger management, conflict resolution and even political positioning that allows the females to gently dominate the males, and to prevent murder and war in their communities... no bonobo has ever been seen killing another bonobo in the wild or in captivity. Their uncanny ability to make "peace through pleasure" is intrinsically related to their sexuality."

One of their unique behaviours is what observers have dubbed 'The Bonobo Handshake,' that is, social sexual contact. "To strengthen their relationships, females will rub their genitals together. If anyone in the group, male or female, is feeling stressed, anxious, or irritated, someone will run over and give them a 'bonobo handshake.' This kind of conflict resolution seems to be at the heart of their peaceful society."

There is one shadow: the bonobo population is declining because of the pressures of habitat loss and hunting. There are several organizations and foundations working to protect bonobos and their habitat, which many other species share. See www.bonobos.org or www.blockbonobofoundation.org.

In the meantime, Happy Bonobo Day! Enjoy!

World Hippopotamus Day

February 15 is World Hippopotamus Day. It is a day to honour the hippopotamus and support action to preserve hippos, which means preserving their habitat, protecting them from poaching, and minimizing conflicts between humans and hippos.

Once thought to be related to pigs and other even-toed ungulates, we now know that the hippo's closest living relatives are actually whales, from which they diverged about 55 million years ago. Appealing as they look in their own pudgy way, it is best to stay well clear of them. In Africa, about 500 people are killed by hippopotamuses every year, which makes them much more dangerous than lions and other large carnivores. They are short-tempered and aggressive, especially when protecting their young. If a boat enters their territory, they may overturn it and kill the occupants. On land, they can easily outrun the fastest human. Admire them from a distance.

But left alone, they are amazing creatures. We should all be grateful for that day 55 million years ago when evolution gave a whale a tiny nudge in a different direction, starting a development which eventually led to the wonderful hippopotamus.

Ulli Diemer
February 15, 2022

International Day of Action for Rivers

March 14 is the 25th International Day of Action for Rivers.
The announcement says: “The International Day of Action for Rivers is a day dedicated to solidarity -- when diverse communities around the world come together with one voice to say that rivers matter. That communities having access to clean and flowing water matters. That everyone should have a say in decisions that affect their water and their lives. That it’s our time to stand up for these rights, now more than ever. Rivers are key to restoring and maintaining the world’s biodiversity. River systems are the zone of Earth’s highest biological diversity “

This is a cause I can whole-heartedly support. Rivers have always been special to me, starting perhaps when the ship that brought my mother and me to Canada sailed up the St. Lawrence River. The lower St. Lawrence is no longer the ocean, but it is not quite river yet, or perhaps it is both: it is in transition, as my life was in transition as we slowly headed up the river.

Growing up in Toronto, the Don River and all the little creeks that flow into it were special places that I loved to explore. I still return to them regularly. Later I branched out to the Humber and the Rouge. For many years, the Saugeen was the river closest to my heart: I canoed, kayaked, swam, and simply sat by the shore watching it. I watched it flow by in quiet tranquility – and I watched it rise more than ten feet in a few hours and triple its width as it flooded the land.

There are others: the Grand River flowing through Paris, Ontario, the little Kagawong River on Manitoulin Island, the majestic Saint John River (Wolastoq to the Maliseet) in New Brunswick, and the Exploits and Humber Rivers in Newfoundland – all of them are rivers I have come to have a special relationship with. The living waters of a river are among the most precious glories this planet has to offer. I am always drawn to rivers. I treasure them.

The photo is of the Saint John (Wolastoq) River near Hartland.

World Frog Day

It was rather exasperating. We could hear the birds, several of them, up in the trees above our campsite in Arrowhead Park, but we couldn't see them, even though we had binoculars and were checking out the branches their calls seemed to be coming from. This happened several times during the day, and then again the next day. Each time, the binoculars came out, we looked up – and nothing. It was quite puzzling.

Eventually a Park employee came by, doing his rounds of the campsites. 'Do you know what is making those sounds?" Miriam asked him. (In our relationship, Miriam was in charge of speaking to strangers.) "Those are Gray Treefrogs," he said. "You can't see them because they are the same colour as the bark of the tree." Ah! Live and learn!

Frogs are tricky. We had a similar sort of experience one spring day in another Southern Ontario woodland. Several vernal ponds had formed, and from one of them, we heard the sounds of ducks. We were a bit surprised that ducks should choose this spot in the woods, just a few dozen yards away from the river, but we were happy to go check them out. Only – there were no ducks. It was a small pond, no hidden spots where ducks could be lurking. But the quacking continued. Closer examination revealed that the quacking sounds were being made by little frogs: wood frogs, as we later learned. The males make quacking sounds to attract females. This seems to work well: wood frogs are widespread throughout North America. They are the only North American frog found north of the Arctic Circle. Wood Frogs, like Spring Peepers, can tolerate below-freezing temperatures: no mean feat for a cold-blooded animal.

Spring Peepers are usually the first to appear in Ontario. They can be heard – peeping enthusiastically! -- when ponds are still partly covered with ice and patches of snow persist along the shore. We often associate spring with birdsong, but choruses of Spring Peepers can be heard when most of our migratory birds are still well to the south. It's a sound, I find, that makes me happy.

Peak frog season comes a bit later in the spring. One of the best places I know of to hear frogs is MacGregor Point Provincial Park on Lake Huron. There are several large ponds in the park which provide ideal frog habitat. In April or early May, when frog mating season is at its peak, you can sit beside a pond and immerse yourself in frog sound. They can be extraordinarily loud, especially when several species -- Spring Peepers, Wood Frogs, Leopard Frogs, Chorus Frogs, and Mink Frogs – combine in a frenzied cacophony. There were times at MacGregor when we debated whether we should wear ear protection when we sat next to the marsh. Male frogs, like males of certain other species, seem to have a mating strategy that boils down to 'choose me, I'm the loudest.'

Sadly, frogs are not doing well. Frog populations around the world are declining; a number of species are on the verge of extinction. The reasons are complex, but ultimately it seems that climate change and the contamination of fresh water, even hundreds of miles from the source of pollutants, are to blame. Frogs breathe through their skin, which makes them particularly susceptible to contaminants. Frogs, and amphibians generally, are indicator species, comparable to the canaries in the coal mine. They are telling us that things are not going well on our planet. World Frog Day exists to draw attention to the problems of frogs – as well as to celebrate them. To celebrate them, head out into frog breeding territory in April, and enjoy the chorus of frog-song.

Ulli Diemer
March 20, 2022

The photo is of Northern Leopard Frogs, MacGregor Point Provincial Park, May 1, 2018. Photo by Miriam Garfinkle.

Down at the lake

Down at the lake
Redwings announce their arrival
Winter ducks prepare to leave
A beaver takes a leisurely swim
And grebes loudly declare their passion.
Spring!

Pigeons and people

When I walk in downtown Toronto – something I do nearly every day – I find I spend a lot of time observing other pedestrians. That's partly a matter of curiosity, because people never cease to fascinate me, but it's also a matter of necessity, because the sidewalks and intersections are bustling with people, and you have to be alert to avoid bumping into each other.

What I find amazing is how well most of us perform our parts in the intricate ballet that takes place on a city sidewalk. In the busy times of day, which is when I'm usually out there, there can be hundreds of people in motion on a single block, heading in the same direction, heading in the opposite direction, criss-crossing the street, talking to people beside them, walking in and out of stores, hefting bags, musical instruments, and sports equipment, or coming to a sudden stop.

On top of that, many of them are looking at their phones, rather than at where they are going. That's a bit imprecise, actually. Some of them are looking at the GPS on their phones, which may in fact tell them in which direction their destination lies, but unfortunately doesn't tell them if someone is standing in front of them.

And yet it all works. We weave, dodge, zig-zag, move to one side or the other, slow down, speed up, and we nearly always do it without colliding.

We aren't the only ones who manage this. Every self-respecting downtown, including Toronto's, has pigeons, and pigeons have mastered the sidewalk ballet quite as expertly as we humans have. I try to vary my route to and from the office, but whichever route I take reliably features several spots where pigeons gather. These spots are invariably on a sidewalk or walkway. That's where the food is. There is what might be called naturally occurring food, for example near the places where people eat, and drop, take-out food, and then there are locations where people come to feed the pigeons, and where the pigeons consequently come to be fed.

Many of those pigeon-feeding spots – Philosopher's Walk and Queen's Park North are two I am familiar with – are right on busy walkways. Not a problem, not for the pigeons, anyway. The pigeons are simply another kind of pedestrian, aware of, but not perturbed by, the steady stream of human pedestrians passing by. They'll walk a few inches to one side or the other to avoid a human, or another pigeon, but that's all. They rarely bother to take to the air, except when arriving or leaving as a flock, at which times they demonstrate their remarkable ability to stay close together without colliding: in three dimensions, not merely the two dimensions we humans have mastered.

I imagine an invisible extra-terrestrial observer studying the scene in Queen's Park. We humans are of course very aware that we are human, and we think that makes us special. From an extraterrestrial's point of view, however, that difference might not seem so significant. To them, the scene might appear as a considerable number of busy two-legged vertebrates, some bigger, some smaller, some with wings, some without, all engaged in Urban Pedestrian Behaviour, going about their mysterious two-legged business. Obviously, an observer would conclude, we belong together.

They would be right. For better or worse, it seems humans and pigeons do belong together. Our relationship began thousands of years ago, when wild rock doves nesting on cliffs somewhere in the Fertile Crescent or the Mediterranean region started to notice that those humans down there were gathering grain and spilling some of that grain near where they lived. Free food!

Eventually those human started to put up structures made of mud, wood, and stone. Free nesting sites close to the food!

The humans, for their part, learned that rock doves could easily be tamed if you took the young from the nests. They could then be induced to breed (not that much inducement is needed with rock doves) and some of the young they produced could be eaten. Free food! Free feathers!

We've been together ever since. When humans moved from tiny clusters of huts to villages, and then to towns, and then into cities, rock doves/pigeons moved right along with us. ("Pigeon" and "dove" are interchangeable terms used to refer to the same species of birds. Our common pigeons – *Columba Livia* – are known as rock doves or rock pigeons.)

Today pigeons are the quintessential city bird. In fact, pigeons (along with perhaps sparrows and starlings) may be the only birds that many people living in dense urban areas ever see.

Not everyone likes having them around. They gather and roost in large numbers, which some people find intimidating, and they produce copious quantities of droppings, which are not only gross if you've unwarily walked below a pigeon, but which can be a health hazard. Diseases associated with pigeon droppings include Cryptococcosis, Histoplasmosis and Psittacosis.

I recall an incident when my partner Miriam and I were on a bike ride which took us through St. Jamestown, a dense cluster of highrise buildings near Parliament and Wellesley. We dismounted our bicycles to check out the offerings of the street vendors who were clustered on the sidewalk near the supermarket. That's when Miriam spotted the outside enclosure where customers picked up carts to take into the supermarket. The area, and the carts, were filthy with pigeon droppings and garbage. Miriam was outraged. The community health centre where she worked as a physician serves many people who live in St. Jamestown, people whose poverty disadvantages them in multiple ways. Here they were having to use filthy pigeon-shit-encrusted shopping carts to buy their groceries.

"Wait here!" she said, and marched into the supermarket to demand to speak to the manager. "I'm a doctor," she told him. "The cart area outside is a serious health hazard, and I will have to report you to public health if you don't get it cleaned up immediately." I'm not sure if the bicycle helmet she was wearing added to her authority or not, but less than five minutes later, two supermarket employees were out there with hoses and cleaning equipment. Miriam watched them get to work, and then told me "OK, we can go now."

Pigeon problems largely arise from their sociability – they like to hang out together – and many of those problems are due to people feeding them, which concentrates them, and their droppings, in areas frequented by humans.

Every city in the world, I suspect, has people who love to feed pigeons. And many cities have in fact prohibited feeding the pigeons, but people who feed pigeons are almost impossible to deter. I witnessed an argument just a couple of days ago at the corner of Huron and Bloor featuring a woman who was giving her daughter food to give to the pigeons, and a man who lived in the adjacent building telling them to stop because the pigeons poop all over the walkway in front of the building. In the park a couple of blocks from where I live, there has been a sign forbidding feeding the pigeons for as long as I can remember, certainly more than ten years. The sign is easy to find: just look for the flock of pigeons on the ground, eating the food that people leave, day in and day out, near the base of the sign.

I am somewhat ambivalent about people feeding pigeons. I don't approve of it, but I suspect that many of the people who do it are lonely and deprived of human contact, and that pigeons are the only living beings they actually get to interact with regularly. So I withhold judgement.

Places where food is to be found are the social centres of pigeon life. They offer not only food, but the possibility of sex. A male who spots a likely female can puff up his neck, bob his head repeatedly, walk back and forth, bow, and make seductive cooing noises. Who could resist that?

Doves, including pigeons, have long been symbols of fertility, and it's easy to see why. Like humans, pigeons mate year-round. If conditions are good, a female may lay six clutches of eggs a year. Pigeons aren't fussy about their nesting sites, nor are they overly sentimental. If a brood fails, perhaps because of an unexpected prolonged cold spell, they'll pile a bit of additional nesting material on top of the unhatched eggs or the dead babies, and start again.

Cities provide an abundance of nesting sites for a bird as creative and adaptable as a pigeon. The pre-renovation Royal Ontario Museum, I recall, had window ledges with tall spikes embedded in them to the prevent pigeons from landing or nesting on the ledges. The pigeons responded by stuffing nesting material between the spikes until eventually they built up a pile of twigs that was higher than the tops of the spikes. And then they built their nests. At another location I recall, an underpass coming off Highway 427, the municipality had put up orange netting to prevent pigeons from nesting there. I think it worked for a few months, before the pigeons figured it out. After that, you could see pigeon nests which incorporated orange netting as part of the nesting material.

Pigeons, ornithologists tell us, are generally monogamous. "Generally monogamous" – there's an interesting concept. From my own readings in natural history, I gather that there are two kinds of monogamy among mammals and birds. The two kinds might be referred to "100% monogamy" and "monogamy-lite." The latter kind could be defined as "monogamous most of the time, but if an opportunity presents itself, I'll have a quickie with someone else." Pigeons fall into the latter category.

In addition to being smart in their own right, pigeons have also played an important role in the history of science, notably in Darwin's working out of the theory of evolution.

The birds most famously associated with Darwin are the finches of the Galapagos Islands. The thirteen species of finch he found on the various islands had all evolved from a common ancestor,

but had then evolved different features, notably beaks, in adapting to the food sources on the different islands they found themselves on. They are a powerful illustration of evolution at work.

For Darwin, though, encountering the finches of the Galapagos did not represent a ‘eureka’ moment. He didn’t even realize they were all finches until the specimens he had collected were examined by taxonomists back in England. It was only later that he fully realized the strong evidence for evolution that they provided, and used that evidence to further support the theory he had already developed.

The birds that provided Darwin with some of the most striking evidence for evolution were pigeons. Thanks to the efforts of pigeon breeders – of whom Darwin himself became one in the course of his research – there were countless varieties of domesticated pigeons, all apparently descended from a common ancestor, the Columba Livia or Rock Dove. The fact that so many varieties could be produced by selective breeding was evidence that species *could* change. The same process could take place without human intervention, Darwin was to conclude, through accidental variation and natural selection: the mechanisms through which evolution does its work.

Darwin’s knowledge of, and passion for pigeons, was known to his family and friends, and stood out in his writings. Whitwell Elwrin, an early pre-publication reader of the manuscript version of *On the Origin of Species* who was hostile to Darwin’s theory of evolution, wrote in his reader’s notes that the manuscript was “a wild & foolish piece of imagination” which ought not to be published. However, he suggested, the section on pigeons could be developed into a book of its own. Such a book would sell well, Elwrin wrote, because “Everybody is interested in pigeons.”

The Origin of Species, with its “wild & foolish” theories, did get published, and changed the history of science. A few years later, Darwin published *The Variation of Animals and Plants Under Domestication*, with a lengthy and beautifully illustrated on pigeons. It is still read today. Darwin was definitely very much interested in pigeons. So am I.

By Ulli Diemer
October 14, 2022

World Curlew Day 2023

I have been producing a nature calendar (featuring my late partner Miriam Garfinkle's nature photos) for the past five years. I include a miscellany of days that I think are worth noting, some of them political, many related to nature, and a few that might be considered slightly idiosyncratic, like World Chocolate Day (July 7) and International Beer Day (August 4).

April 21 is World Curlew Day. Curlews are a wading bird with long bills, similar to Sandpipers. There are – or were – nine species of Curlew. Now, in all likelihood there are only eight species. The ninth species, the Eskimo Curlew, was at one time one of the most numerous shorebirds on the American continents, with a population in the millions. They shared the fate of the Passenger Pigeon, the Great Auk, and the Labrador Duck, which also thrived in large numbers until Europeans arrived. Eskimo Curlews were highly social, and that was a key element in their demise. They travelled in large flocks, making it easy for groups of hunters to shoot them. And shoot them. And shoot them. Not only that, but their instinct, when a member of the flock falls to the ground, is to swirl down to see what is wrong. Shoot one, and hundreds more will fly into shooting range.

There is still a small degree of ambiguity about the fate of the Eskimo Curlew. The last confirmed sighting was in 1963. Confirmed because the man who saw it shot it (of course), so there was a body to identify. Nevertheless there have been a few possible unconfirmed sightings since then. It's possible a few still linger on somewhere, in the same way as a few Ivory-billed Woodpeckers are said to hang on in a swamp in Louisiana. The official status of the Eskimo Curlew is "Critically Endangered or Extinct." If by some miracle you see one, you aren't supposed to shoot it.

The Eskimo Curlew has a special place in Canadian literature. Fred Bodsworth's book, **Last of the Curlews** (surely one of the few adult novels whose main character is a bird) was published in 1954. It became an enormous bestseller, selling more than three million copies, that at a time when Canada's population was 18 million. At the time, it was apparently the best-selling Canadian book of all time. An animated film based on the book appeared in 1972

The book tells the story of a lone male Curlew trying to find a mate. I don't think it requires a spoiler alert to indicate how the story ends: after all, the book is called Last of the Curlews.

The photo of the Eskimo Curlew was taken by Don Bleitz in 1962. It was the only time an Eskimo Curlew was ever photographed.

Remaining human

How can we live in this world? It seems impossible. And yet we must.

I wake up, check the news. I know it will upset me, but I can't help myself.

Starvation in Gaza. Starvation. Not starvation caused by famine or crop failure, but starvation deliberately brought about by the government of Israel, an unspeakably evil regime which is committing the world's first live-streamed genocide while other governments do nothing – except provide support.

I type these words, and I hear a familiar song. It's a white-throated sparrow, up in a tree in my backyard or the neighbour's backyard. I have been tracking their arrival in the backyard for at least a decade. In 2016, it arrived on May 10. In 2022, it arrived on May 2. In 2023, it came on April 28. Last year, it arrived on April 19 – so early! I say "it arrived" but it can't be the same bird returning all these years. They don't live that long. Perhaps the word gets passed down from one generation to the next: this backyard is a good spot to stop over for a couple of days on the northward migration.

The song of the white-throated sparrow makes me think about Rosa Luxemburg. She was devastated by the horrific slaughter of the First World War, which she and her comrades had tried so hard to prevent. She spent much of the war in prison, where she wrote the fiery anti-war 'Junius pamphlet' which was smuggled out of the prison and published under a pseudonym.

She also observed and commented on nature. Her letters from prison were full of news of the plants and birds she was observing. She asked that, if she died, there be no pompous phrases on her grave, "Only two syllables will be allowed to appear on my gravestone: '*Tsvee-tsvee.*'" That, she explained, is the call of Kohlmeise, a bird similar to our chickadees.

In between her prison sentences, she had a brief interlude when she was out of jail, living in Berlin, in close touch with her comrades in the anti-war struggle, among them Karl and Sophie Liebknecht. As Richard Abernethy recounts in 'Rosa Luxemburg's Birds':
"In Berlin, one morning in April 1916, Sophie and Karl Liebknecht received a telephone call from Rosa Luxemburg. On this occasion, the call was not about their shared politics – opposition to the First World War, as internationalists and revolutionary socialists. What Rosa had to tell them was that a nightingale was singing in the botanic gardens. The three of them made an excursion to listen to it."

And so the song of a white-throated sparrow leads me to think about Rosa Luxemburg, who wrote: "I feel at home in the entire world, wherever there are clouds and birds and human tears..."

Faced with the inhumanity of states, we have to remain human. We fight for justice, and let our hearts be lifted by the songs of birds.

Ulli Diemer
May 3, 2025

Additional items:

Special Places - https://www.diemer.ca/Docs/Diemer-SpecialPlaces.pdf

Miriam's Nature Calendar 2019 - https://www.diemer.ca/Miriam/Calendar2019.pdf

Miriam's Nature Calendar 2020 - https://www.diemer.ca/Miriam/Calendar2020.pdf

Miriam's Nature Calendar 2021 - https://www.diemer.ca/Miriam/Calendar2021.pdf

Miriam's Nature Calendar 2022 - https://www.diemer.ca/Miriam/Calendar2022.pdf

Miriam's Nature Calendar 2023 - https://www.diemer.ca/Miriam/Calendar2023.pdf

Catch the Wind - https://www.diemer.ca/Photos2/CatchtheWind.pdf