METACOMET LAND TRUST

Spring 2020

A Little Bird Told Me

One chosen purpose for conserving Foxfire Farm is to provide habitat for myriad interdependent creatures, with a special emphasis on birds. As bellwethers of environmental health, birds guide my stewardship decisions. Their successes or failures show me if my somewhat random choices have been for good or ill. They counsel my respect for the great indifference of Nature.

A list of conundrums: to mow or let grow; to cut back or duck under; to till or leave fallow; to deadhead or leave seeds (someone's supper); to alter or leave as is; to interfere or refrain from interfering; and in all of this, there looms the question of how and when? And to whose benefit or detriment?

Most springs, a Canada Goose or two stop by on their way north. This year, a pair found the Cattail marsh haven enough to nest. For a few days, the pair courted in the pasture uphill of the brook, and together built a nest well hidden in the reeds. While the female retreated into her confinement, the male stayed on guard, a careful sentinel along the river edge, sometimes foraging and, when necessary, honking an alarm. Twenty-eight to thirty days must pass before the eggs hatch; time enough for the grass to turn green, and Red Maple flowers to create a pointillist landscape. Peepers chorus. I begin the season's work of mowing paths in the pollinator habitat field nearby. Dandelions' yellow pixels advertise their alkaline spring tonic. One morning, we watch as the meandering gander comes up the fence line, leisurely pecking here and billing there. He enters a pathway. Suddenly, head up to the max, he marches like a German soldier, plucking off and gobbling down each and every yellow flower.

It is our good fortune to live in an old house with a granite center chimney, whose walk-in hearth in winter is, indeed, the heart of the home. Most of our winter meals are cooked on a Tuscan grill over the fire. We harvest our firewood from windfall in our own woods, mostly oak, hickory, and ash, along with yellow birch and red maple. I disburse the copious ash in various places throughout the farm, often broadcasting it over the snow so it can slowly raise the soil pH during thaw. Of late, I have taken to separating out the charcoal to use in the veggie garden soil. I do this by piling the ash mixture on a small-mesh wire screen, and then dragging the screen down the gravel driveway, leaving the fine ash behind. After rainfall, the ash leaves a grayish "shadow" on the gravel surface.

Each year, a pair of Yellow Shafted Flickers nest in a nearby Red Maple snag. I see them often, gleaning ants from the so-called lawn. This year the male Flicker surprised me with a new-to-me behavior. Repeatedly, he landed in the gritty driveway, lowered his belly to the ground with his wings extended sideways; then whirled in circles scratching and flapping, performing a grand dust dance. While examining the bird-shaped circles he left behind, I noticed that he had "danced" only where the residue of ash lay on top of the gravel. During a pandemic, there's plenty of time for an online search about fireplace ash chemistry! What the flicker "knew" is that wood ash pH is so alkaline that it kills bacteria, gut and skin parasites, as well as mites, and is most effective if the wood burned contained Birch polypore fungus.

In the classroom of the farmstead, Nature is the teacher. The farmer gets to learn.

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