

1-3-20 Wilderness Joy and Eternal Joy

Walking the beach, especially off-season, hiking in the woods, observing and photographing nature, all bring such comfort and joy. I can feel tension melting away as I observe the beauty, listen to the waves and the receding water dragging the pebbles at the beach, the water lapping on the shores of the ponds, watch the ripples of sunlight flickering in the brooks, feel the breezes on my face, and listen to the birds. All these precious gifts are free and yet offer so many rewards!

One of Thursday's gifts was the crystal-clear sound of a winter wren. It is such a tiny bird, but it has a large personality and an even larger voice. Its song always makes me smile. Bigger than a hummingbird but smaller than a chickadee, the wren's round little body and small upright tail and tiny slender beak form one of the cutest birds out there.

On the other end of the spectrum of bird sizes is the great horned owl and they are active this time of year. Mated pairs can be heard talking to each other and announcing their territory to others with their distinctive hooo, hoo, hoo. Listen carefully and you will hear one hoots longer and a little more high-pitched. That one is the female. The male's hoots are shorter and lower-pitched. They breed early because they are such big birds and their young need a long time to mature and learn to hunt.

This is the hooting season! With the quiet of descending darkness, when other birds are quietly roosting, their calls stand out as wondrous indeed! I will accept that gift, as I have never had the pleasure of seeing one in the wild. Their plumage is perfect camouflage for the woods. Even when they sound close and I strain my neck looking upward at what certainly sounds like the location, and I am reminded of trying to find that lost/forgotten smoke detector beeping. As soon as I stand where I was certain of its origin, the next beep comes from a different location. And this game goes on and on for quite a while! I don't think the owls know about the game, but it does make the owl prowl challenging!

If you do not already know about Cornell Lab of Ornithology, check it out. It is easy to navigate the website for identifying birds, listening to their songs and various calls and for plans for building bird boxes. While some small owls, such as the adorable saw-whet and the screech owl only need a three-inch opening for its nest box, the Great Horned Owl requires a much larger home. This magnificent creature's nest does not require carpentry skills, for it nests in the open fork of a

tree, often building on top of a nest previously used by red tailed hawks, or even squirrels.

Making a nest for Great Horned Owls involves materials such as chicken wire and landscaping fabric. A cone is formed and lined with sticks to get it started. The tricky part is placing it in the crotch of a tree 15 to 45 feet high. You must have some experienced help with that being accomplished safely! This is when you want a tree person with a lift-bucket as a friend. The wooden nesting box for the little saw-whet can be placed 12 to 15 feet high. That might be manageable with a good ladder and a helping hand.

Here's the link to plans for nesting boxes and tips on how to avoid unwanted guests in them such as hornets or squirrels:

<https://www.birds.cornell.edu/home/search/?q=boxes%20for%20owls>

When nature rewards me with joy, I am reminded of this quote from Moby Dick: *“But even so, amid the tornadoed Atlantic of my being, do I myself still for ever centrally disport in mute calm; and while ponderous planets of unwaning woe revolve round me, deep down and deep inland there I still bathe me in eternal mildness of joy.”*

It acknowledges the pain and sorrow we all experience and reminds me that joy is also possible in this complicated life. That joy is welcome anytime. Learning to bathe ourselves in that eternal mildness of joy that resides deep down inside each of us is, I suspect, a life-long lesson to learn and practice. Let's enjoy each step along the way.

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