



European Starling (*Sturnus vulgaris*). Photo by Don Marler

# PHOTOGRAPHING KANSAS BIRDS DURING LOCKDOWN

Don Marler

## ■ FOREWORD BY MICHAEL DONNELLY, PRAIRIE WINGS EDITOR

2020 will be remembered as the year of the great pandemic. Covid-19 disrupted lives worldwide like a world war. People hunkered down at home, unwilling to risk seeing friends, grandchildren and grandparents, deprived of going to concerts or sporting events, discouraged or forbidden to drop by the neighborhood bar, or do anything with gatherings of other people. As many as could do so were forced to work from home; students had to attend classes remotely, and everyone spent even more hours than was the case in “normal” circumstances staring at a computer screen. The psychological stress of the virus and the measures that were necessary dealing with it have been blamed for increasing obesity, a rise in addiction, domestic violence, suicides and random shootings.

However, in the absence of customary social stimuli, we were driven to drop back and rely on our internal resources. Among the activities that it was possible to engage in alone or with immediate family, many people discovered, or rediscovered, observing and interacting with nature: taking long walks alone in the woods and

fields and marshes, observing and even photographing wildlife, keeping records of birds that visited backyard feeders. Just as there has been a plethora of opinion pieces and blogs about the devastating toll of the psychological and social consequences of the virus, there has been a perhaps smaller and less shrill outpouring of accounts of the positive effects of such novel or renewed interactions with the natural world—the natural world that has, in fact, been largely marginalized for so many of us by the pace of contemporary life.

In this issue of *Prairie Wings*, we want to highlight a personal narrative from a man who coped with the challenge of Covid-19 by engaging in ‘nature therapy’—a man who rediscovered a childhood fascination with birds and combined it with adult skills in photography. Don’s account is a paradigmatic instance of the value of getting back in touch with the rhythms of lives and networks that are not our own—testimony to values that AOK has always espoused: encouraging knowledge and appreciation of the natural world here in Kansas.

Left panel: Female Brown-headed Cowbird (*Molothrus ater*); upper right, female or juvenile House Sparrow (*Passer domesticus*); lower right, male Brown-headed Cowbird (*Molothrus ater*).  
Photos by Don Marler



## ARTICLE BY DON MARLER

At age five, during summer vacation, I spent my weekends on my parent's farm, where they would retire someday. Before dawn on Saturdays, we would drive from Wichita to a hundred year old farmhouse just nine miles southwest of Fredonia, Kansas. After working all day Saturday, on Sunday mornings I would wake up to the smell of Folgers coffee and sausage gravy coming upstairs from the downstairs kitchen.

The haunting call of an Eastern Whip-poor-will coming through the second story open bedroom window encouraged me to roll out of bed while it was still dark. I had learned that the forest of Black Jack trees that grew up on the hill above the farmhouse was a haven for birds. The mating calls of male Whippoorwills reverberating off the wooden lath board walls enticed me to hurry downstairs for coffee and hot biscuits covered in sausage gravy.

Some seventy-three years later, I can still recall the times after breakfast that I stumbled out toward the milk barn before first light. The mottled gray and brown male Whip-poor-will's coloring blended into the forest so well, that I couldn't see him. But my young ears heard his soulful call well.

From the darkness, he would entertain me as I started my day. I enjoyed mimicking his call. The delightful surprise of an identical answer coming back to me amazed and thrilled me. I didn't tell my parents for fear they would think me crazy. "Whip-poor-will... Whip-poor-will."

That was when I first knew that I loved interacting with birds. Not long after that, I bought my first camera. It cost fifty-cents and a Wheaties box top. Two weeks later it arrived in the mail and I began taking pictures. When I picked up the prints at the drug store the following week, I realized that I had captured a split instant in time that I could enjoy and share with others for a lifetime. That was when I knew photography was going to play an important role in my life.

Not long after that, my life events put photography and birds on the back burner for the next seventy-one years. After I retired from practicing dentistry, things slowed down for me, so I accepted a wonderful job taking pictures for the Wichita Wings Indoor Soccer team.



But when the coronavirus broke out in Wichita, Kansas around February of 2020, the soccer season was cancelled and I lost my job as a high-action sports photographer. I was forced to stay at home to avoid catching the virus, but the new specialized camera with a long telephoto lens I had bought for indoor soccer offered an opportunity to capture images of the wild birds of Kansas. I knew I had to keep my anticipation skills and shutter finger ready for when we got back to normal and I was shooting fast soccer action.

Knowing that I was old school and behind the times in keeping up with the development of digital cameras and photographic editing software, I began to carefully study the capabilities of my new digital, telephoto camera and Exposure 6 photographic editing software. I exposed thousands of images of European Starlings, woodpeckers, Dark-eyed Juncos, Northern Cardinals, American Robins that came to my backyard. Suddenly I realized that my knowledge and appreciation for birds had grown.

## Watching them interact through the telephoto lens of my camera, I could hardly believe the things I had been missing just looking with my naked eyes.

I watched as one bird stood watch for predators while numerous others gobbled down food. Then they would switch and let the lookout eat while a different bird stood watch.

The capabilities of the small, light, digital camera I recently purchased were unimaginable when I was a boy. With a 600mm focal length lens, I could take a close up of a tiny House Finch one hundred feet away, captured through my kitchen window. With the ability to take twenty two frames a second, I could capture an European Starling coming in for a landing and have fifty images to choose from. The possibilities were endless.

The power of modern digital photographic software was even more impressive. I learned how to improve an image that was too dark and had distracting elements in it making it unusable in the days of film. With today's technological advances, I could lighten or sharpen an image and crop out distractions on my computer to make an image ready to be published.

The Covid lockdown had provided an opportunity to concentrate on the things in life that are truly important, but often overlooked like, for me, wild birds and modern digital photography. The lockdown played an important part in restoring my love of birds and photography that I had once enjoyed as a boy.

European Starling (*Sturnus vulgaris*) at the feeder



Don Marler  
Photography