



Unconventional Companions in Unusual Times

Exploring backyard biodiversity and the meaning of community during a time of isolation.

By Jeanne Townsend Handy
Photos by Tom Handy

A ruby-throated hummingbird visits a native cardinal flower, which is dependent on hummingbirds for pollination.

SOME CONSERVATION LEADERS have been urging us to recognize that the continued survival of other species will depend upon small patches of diverse backyard habitat, or “backyard biodiversity.” National lands and nature preserves alone, they say, will not be enough to sustain dynamic communities, particularly of our native species. We need corridors between preserves and stop-over points along migratory routes. When one learns that most of the land in the lower 48 states is in private hands – 85.6 percent of the land east of the Mississippi River – it seems likely this message is true, crucially so. Wildlife needs us, the homeowners.

But when the coronavirus struck and the shelter-in-place orders went out, notions of who needs whom flipped upside-down. Despite our technological ties – texts and FaceTime, Zoom meetings and Facebook groups – the urge to be in the presence of other living, breathing beings remains. For many of us, backyard wildlife has suddenly become our family, our co-workers, our community

***BACKYARD HAPPENINGS:** The flashy out-of-town visitors have arrived – the rose-breasted grosbeaks and Baltimore orioles. The “regulars” take a back seat for now, but still we depend on seeing them - the downy and red-bellied woodpeckers, the nuthatches, the northern flickers, the cardinals, blue jays, robins, and goldfinches, which this spring are conspicuous for their numbers. When the visitors leave, the eagerness to see our more constant companions will return.*

I recall the sense of wonder my husband and I felt when first moving to our current home 11 years ago from an adolescent subdivision with sparse treescaping to a home located in a 60s-era pocket of development nudging up against an area known for its venerable homes and equally venerable trees. Our newly acquired property boasted tree varieties that were more than the latest must-have specimens in a momentary landscaping trend, primarily native trees with an enduring Illinois history. Our landscape also boasted – no coincidence – an astonishing number and assortment of birds, some of which I did not expect to see outside of a patch of woods.

We realized we were seeing a home landscape that LIVES, and we quickly became greedy for more – more plants, more creatures, more beneficial insects. We consciously started researching and planting for other species as well as ourselves: chinquapin oak, redbud, and flowering dogwood trees; serviceberry, chokeberry, spicebush and witch hazel shrubs; native shade plants and prairie plants and groundcovers and grasses. Our view of homescaping was surely shifting and continues to do so. A landscape without the vibrancy of wildlife in motion appears barren.

Now, forced into seclusion, we seek the society and distraction provided by our backyard residents and visitors. And we are not alone. The Cornell Lab of Ornithology notes that birdwatching has become a popular pastime during the COVID-19 crisis, not only for people with access to green space but also for those bird seekers accessing the Lab’s webcam



A curious cottontail explores his world.

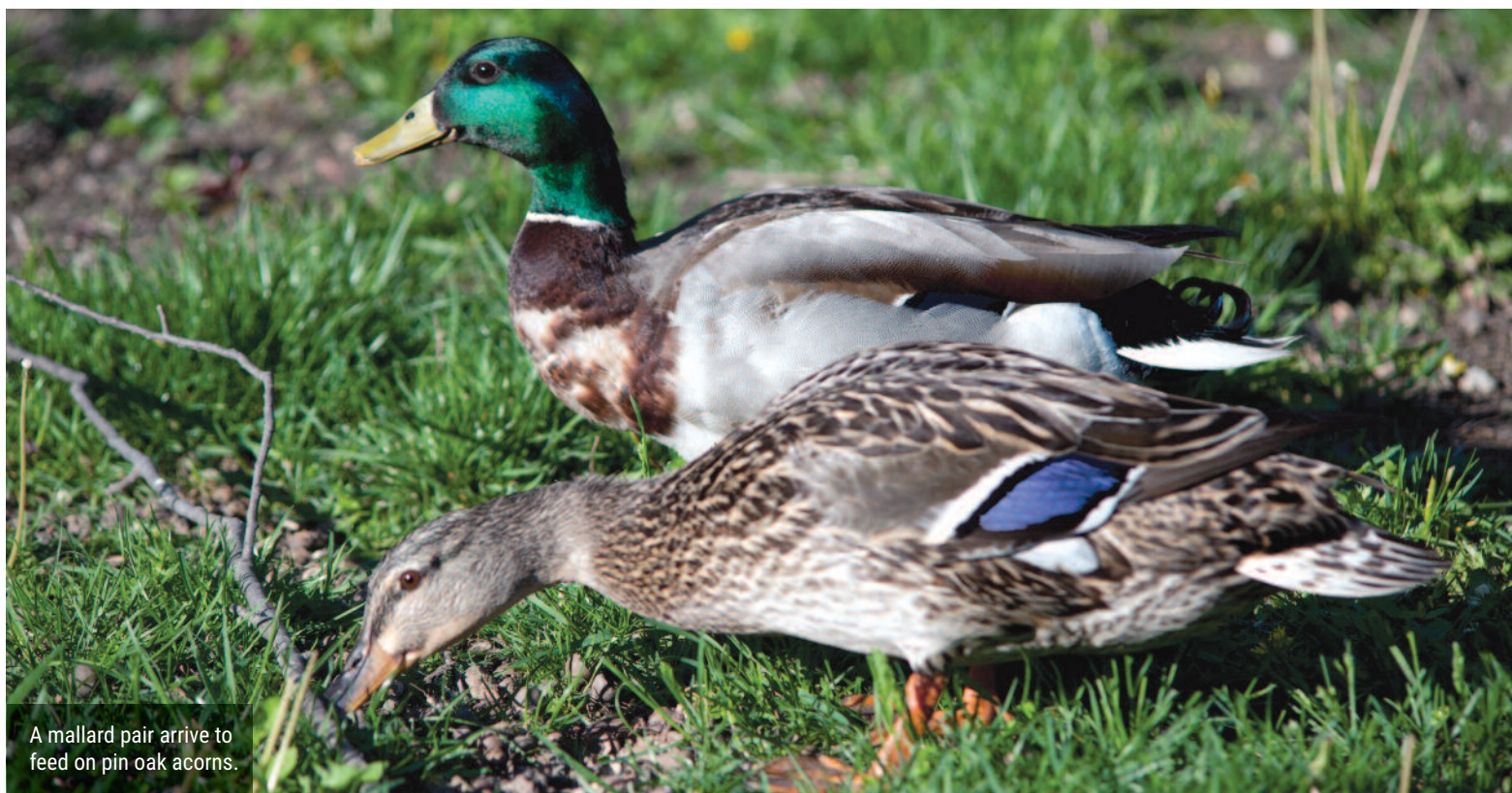
offerings. Viewers spent triple the amount of time on the webcam feeds during the months of March through May 2020 than they did the prior year, which is thought to be the result of people seeking comfort from nature in a time of stress, seeking learning opportunities and an antidote to isolation. For those of us with the ability to “participate” daily in the lives of nearby creatures by observing them through windows or from patios and porches, the presence of birds and other creatures has indeed been comforting. Little did we consider that efforts

made toward diversifying our personal landscape could unexpectedly become a significant component of a modern-day emergency preparedness kit.

BACKYARD HAPPENINGS: *A young rabbit snatches a low-hanging flower from the hydrangea bush bordering the patio, apparently to determine if it is tasty (uh, not so much). After quickly dropping the flower, it hops over to peer through our backdoor window to look for anything else of interest. The mallard ducks have made their arrival and graze the front yard for pin oak acorns.*

As social commitments have disappeared, I spend more time observing the goings-on outdoors as well as looking for ways to further the success of this community. I refamiliarize myself with such enduring publications as *Backyard Conservation* and *Creating Habitats and Homes for Illinois Wildlife*, a book created by the Illinois Department of Natural Resources and the University of Illinois. It includes a chapter specifically focused on backyards, which features gorgeous photography along with informative tables about native trees and shrubs as well as butterfly larval and nectar sources. Sticky-note markers now protrude from Guy Sternberg’s book, *Native Trees for North American Landscapes*, in which he comments on the special wildlife and historical value of each featured tree. “All trees have many stories,” he writes.

Turning to my edition of the National Wildlife Federation’s book, *The Backyard Naturalist*, I find it begins with a section called “A Little Less Lawn, Please,” which in turn takes me to an essay by science writer David Quammen called “Rethinking the Lawn,” which is memorable for its combination of humor



A mallard pair arrive to feed on pin oak acorns.



A monarch caterpillar feeds on milkweed – the first food source needed in its life cycle.

and insight. In it Quammen expounds upon a theory he developed as a mower-pushing pre-teen in the late 50s/early 60s – that suburban lawns were part of a communist plot:

“Like the helpless GI in *The Manchurian Candidate*, so it seemed, the entire class of American suburbanites had all somehow been brainwashed to execute certain dronish tasks. Mow. Rake. Trim. Fertilize. Kill off the broadleaf invaders with poison. Mow again.”

I laugh upon rereading the essay, but the underlying truth nevertheless hits home. And, as Quammen and many others have noted, it is not just time that is spent on lawn maintenance but money and resources as well. They are a part of our suburbanite tradition. They are expected.

But mainstream rallying cries to “Save the monarchs!” “Protect the bees!” have been increasing, and new information and programs explaining how homeowners can help achieve these worthy goals are readily available. My isolation research includes occasional webinars such as those presented by the University of Illinois (UofI) Extension’s *Everyday Environment* program. From these presentations I have learned that there are more than 40 million acres of turf grass in the U.S. and that homeowners use three times more pesticide per acre than farmers; that native plants support ecosystem function and a greater number of species than non-native options; that 90 percent of insect larvae and plant-eating insects eat only plants with which they co-evolved and that even cultivars of native plants, or “nativars,” may have been bred to be sterile and insect resistant (meaning pollinator resistant).

I learn that plants we use for landscaping can make or break a food web.

BACKYARD HAPPENINGS: Day in and day out I notice various levels of society and interaction: a few young squirrels jumping from a tree limb, one after another, onto the bird feeder pole like kids off the high dive at a public pool (their unsuccessful efforts to access the bird food eventually curtailed with shortening of the limb); the shivery-shake of fledglings begging for food from a harried parent; the pair of doves, side-by-side on the short brick wall next to the patio, looking very much like a happy couple admiring the lay of their land.

I am beginning to favor certain birds not because they are remarkable but because of their personalities. Such is the case with the mourning doves. “Endearing doves” I now think of them with their easy-going ways, their commitment to mates, and their comforting cooing. I feel a connection to these most common of birds while at the same time realizing that even common birds may not be common in everyone’s backyard. A visitor to my home exclaimed, “Look, a dove!” And later, “Look, a blue jay!” Likewise, a friend unwittingly confirmed how rare it is to find native plants in the home landscape when commenting on our “exotic” plants (translation: you don’t see them in most yards).

Yet, I find encouragement in the fact that there is excitement in the voices of people who spot our birds, and that a neighbor

referred to our native landscaping attempts as “phenomenal” and “inspirational.” As I mull over my isolation research, I find myself thinking about new ways to interact with and assist the multi-species community at large. BIG THOUGHTS. I admire photos of home landscaping that have resulted in Illinois Audubon Society Bird and Butterfly Sanctuary certification and consider that there are citizen science programs such as Cornell Lab’s FeederWatch and UofI’s I-Pollinate to which we can contribute much-needed information. Maybe we can augment our plantings to provide for the rusty patched bumble bee, which is in serious decline and perhaps help save a species.

Something bigger yet?

My isolation research has included the 2019 book, *Nature’s Best Hope*, by Douglas Tallamy, professor of entomology and wildlife ecology at the University of Delaware and a prominent advocate of backyard biodiversity. In it he asks a fascinating what-if question: “What if each American landowner made it a goal to convert half of his or her lawn to productive native plant communities?” He answers his own question by stating that even with moderate success we could “collectively restore some semblance of ecosystem function to more than 20 million acres of what is now ecological wasteland.” Tallamy puts the size of 20 million acres into a national park perspective:

“It’s bigger than the combined areas of the Everglades, Yellowstone, Yosemite, Grand Teton, Canyonlands, Mount Rainier, North Cascades, Badlands, Olympic, Sequoia, Grand Canyon, Denali, and the Great Smoky Mountains National Parks.”

If we accomplish this, he states, “we can create this country’s largest park system.” He suggests we call it “Home-grown National Park.” Although Tallamy’s proposal was formed

pre-pandemic, seclusion may help push us to think differently about community and to consider more deeply the dismantling of relationships between species that have known each other historically. We now know what it is to miss our communities. We now know isolation. The Homegrown National Park is an idea that captures my imagination. What if?

BACKYARD HAPPENINGS: *“It’s a madhouse out there,” is once again the refrain following a glimpse out of the kitchen window. Squirrels chase each other around and around the trunk of the tulip poplar tree, the bird baths are attracting a crowd, and numerous birds graze the yard (chemical free now for a decade) while others jet from trees to bushes to feeders and back. Bunny is sure to appear soon.*

The mayhem beyond the window is a sight now so sought and expected I could not imagine it otherwise. In fact, if nothing were eating, running, flying, bathing, lounging, and (usually) making me smile, I would find it disturbing. I have watched a blue jay rest upon our bench, spreading its feathers wide, and have since learned that birds may sunbathe to help dry its feathers following a bath – or just because it feels good. I am discovering which plants the bees are most excited about and have come to understand that if I see a bird behaving oddly it most likely is a juvenile that has not quite learned the ropes. I have checked on a monarch caterpillar daily and have actually asked myself, “Do we have pupation sites?” I consider how much worse seclusion would be without these creatures.

In a *New York Times* article, astronaut Scott Kelly reflected on his year in space aboard the International Space Station and offered his advice on how to deal with the isolation forced upon us by the COVID-19 pandemic. He acknowledges the importance of life beyond human and technological connections. He states: “I actually started to crave nature — the color green, the smell of fresh dirt, and the feel of warm sun on my face...My colleagues liked to play a recording of Earth sounds, like birds and rustling trees, and even mosquitoes, over and over. It brought me back to earth.” His best advice for handling the stress of isolation? “Go outside.”

Good advice. It’s a madhouse out there, and it’s time to join them. ■



The decline of pollinators such as bees has become a mainstream concern.



BIOS

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Tom Handy spent a career in visual communication at SIU School of Medicine while occasionally freelancing as a photographer, his work most often published with his wife Jeanne Handy’s writings. His interests in photography, painting and music keep his life exciting.