

## A Fun Morning Sitting and Watching Nature

Several months ago I wrote about a biologist in Tennessee, David Haskell, who visited the same small patch of woods every week or so for a year and recorded the things he observed in a book, "The Forest Unseen: A Year's Watch in Nature". This sounded like a lot of fun so I decided to try to something similar around our place.

But since the density and diversity of the flora and fauna is much less in our part of Texas than in the eastern Tennessee forest, I decided to lay out a nature trail through the pasture and walk it every couple of weeks or so, and I have written about several such walks over the past few months. But as every hunter, birder and naturalist knows, you can't walk through the woods without most all of the critters knowing you are there long before you ever see them, so you miss a lot when you are walking.

I decided, therefore, to just sit still at various places along the trail and see what I could see. So off I went with my milk crate, binoculars and notebook, stopping along the way and sitting quietly for a time just watching nature.

My first stop was not that far from our yard and I could see activity along the fence around the yard, a bird house on the fence and another out in the open pasture. The first activity that caught my eye was a jackrabbit out in the open pasture casually grazing on the newly sprouted grass. He would bite off some grass, chew it, then stretch a bit to reach another clump of grass, chew it, then make a slow-motion lazy hop and begin the process all over.

The next thing I noticed was a fox squirrel climbing down a branch of a post oak and jumping from the branch to the top of a bird house on a fence post. From there he did a high-wire act of balancing by switching his tail back and forth as he walked along the top fence wire until he got close enough to jump to the nearby blackjack oak. Nothing about this was new. I had watched this kind of activity from the house many times. But then another squirrel followed the first one only a few seconds later, then another, then another. At least some, if not all four squirrels appeared to me to be juveniles—this year's litter.

Over the next 20 or 30 minutes I watched numerous squirrel antics, jumping from tree to tree and back again, up this trunk and down the next, chasing, then being chased. These squirrels were obviously not searching for food as they never stopped to eat anything, and they were certainly not hiding from predators, so it is difficult to think they were doing anything but playing—much like human children would do. They were, of course, honing their survival skills.

I watched a wren search around a coral honeysuckle near the bird house, then up on the fence, then onto the bird house and then, hanging upside down, it looked into the bird house. At this point a male English sparrow appeared and chased off the wren.

English sparrows are among the earliest exotic species introduced into the US, being brought to New York around 1850. Normally, I would not want any exotics nesting around the house. But, growing up in near-treeless west Texas, English sparrows were about the only birds I regularly saw as a kid, so I couldn't bring myself to evict these from the nest box.

At my next stop, as I was looking at the live oak sprouts around me, a sparrow flew down in the grass not 8 feet away (I believe it was a rufous-crowned sparrow, but I could be wrong) and it proceeded to rustle through the grass looking for seeds and/or bugs for some time.

At the next stop, a little while after I sat down, a jackrabbit came hopping up to within about 50 or 60 feet and sat, posed with his ears up and the sun shining through his ears so that I could see every vein. Then the wind blew the paper in my notebook and he took off. I don't know, but I don't think this was the same jackrabbit I saw earlier.

Sitting and watching takes more time than walking, but you see a lot more.

Until next time...

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