

Early Morning at Pond Parish, Part II

By TOM SILEO
JUNE 15, 2014

It was after 6:00 a.m. on June 15, 2014. After spending time on the boardwalk leading to Spring Road at Pond Parish Conservation Land, I headed back toward Pond Parish Road. At the sign for the "Observation Deck," I turned right and headed into a hemlock and oak woods and passed cucumber root, hobblebush, maple-leaved viburnum, sarsaparilla, wintergreen and bracken fern.

As I stepped onto the observation deck, I noticed that young red maples and young grey birches had obscured the view of the marsh since I last visited this place in April. It could certainly use some pruning to keep the view open.



Blueberry

Behind the deck grew a high-bush blueberry shrub with an abundant crop of blueberries, unfortunately, still green; but, fortunately, it was behind the deck and out of the way of any plans for pruning to maintain the view.



Chickadee

Soon after I walked onto the deck, I heard a black-capped chickadee calling out a distress or alarm call. This call is very different from its plaintive "fee-bee" song. Instead, it's a series of sharply delivered garbled notes - "teHEE-teHEE (I've also seen it written as "Tseedleed-ee"). I'm not sure it's translatable into human sounds, but when you hear it, you know the bird is upset.

Then, I heard a sharp "chip-chip-chip" coming from a bird that was moving quickly from branch to branch behind me. I turned to look for it and finally saw a chipping sparrow fly from the woods behind me to a low branch in the marsh. It continued its frantic "chip-chip-chip" call as it moved.



Chipping Sparrow with Caterpillar

Last year, a chipping sparrow couple built a nest in a low shrub behind my house. When it was time for the female to sit on her eggs, the male was always nearby. One day, when I knew the eggs must have hatched, I waited for the mother to leave the nest. I approached the shrub and pushed a branch aside to take a peak. I saw three sets of eyes and three little beaks chirping at me. Meanwhile, the male sparrow was beside himself. Obviously upset at me, he continued to call out: "chip-chip-chip...." I understood immediately that I was making him nervous, so I left his offspring alone and walked away. When I was a comfortable distance away, he stopped his chipping, but remained nearby.

This Pond Parish chipping sparrow was similarly anxious, and so I knew I was nearby its nest. But, what about the chickadee? Was I near its nest as well? Chickadees are known to be an early warning system for other birds, and for that reason, other birds will often hang around with them. Is it possible, that this chickadee was warning the sparrow that I was too close to its nest?

In either case, I didn't feel very welcome, which made me wonder: what is the etiquette in such situations? Should I defer to the sparrow? Do I have a right to share this place? Or, should I leave? What is my place in nature? On the one hand, unless he can force me to leave, I have a right to be here (survival of the fittest). On the other hand, as a human being, perhaps I should rise above such base laws of nature. I didn't leave right away. Instead, I watched the chipping sparrow, and I was sure he was watching me.

He left for a bit, but eventually landed on the branch of one of the young red maple trees with a fat, green caterpillar in its beak. The unfortunate caterpillar drooped down from the bird's beak as the sparrow flitted from branch to branch, perhaps unsure if he should risk exposing his nest.

A song sparrow landed on a different maple tree with a crane fly in its beak, but it didn't stay long. Then, a tree swallow flew to the very top of a dead tree that rose about twenty feet above the observation deck. Tree swallows are interesting-looking birds. The metallic blue wings have a beautiful sheen as they reflect the sunlight, and, except for its clean white breast, this bird appears to be all wing, it's shoulders appearing hunched upward to make room for them.

Suddenly, the tree swallow was attacked by another bird and flew off. I immediately noticed the chestnut-colored breast of the assailant. It was a bluebird, but the blue looked almost black under the bright morning sun.

The bluebird preened itself for a bit, but then was chased away from its high perch by a grackle. This must be a popular spot with an attractive vantage point, I thought. I noticed the bluebird just over my head, on an exposed branch.

The grackle didn't stay long. It flew on its own from this favorite perch and almost immediately, the swallow returned, as if attempting to beat out the bluebird.



Chipping Sparrow

Meanwhile, the chipping sparrow and the chickadee had become quiet, probably becoming bored of my presence; perhaps, more trusting? Otherwise, grackles and red-winged blackbirds called out, I heard a couple Canada geese in the distance and a frog trilled from below the deck.

I decided to leave the deck and return home, backtracking along the Pond Parish Loop Trail. I passed by royal fern, bracken fern, cinnamon fern, hayscented fern, New York fern, spinulose woodfern, and sensitive fern. Single yellow cinquefoil blooms dotted the path edge

and the mountain laurels, with just a few blossoms open, promised a beautiful floral display by the Fourth of July.



Powder Moth

Near the property's entrance, I saw a mottled brown and white moth on a Canada mayflower leaf.

Though all these moths have names (the one I saw is a powder moth or *Eufodonia notataria*), I call all these small whitish moths "bird poop moths" because they mimic bird poop as a way to protect themselves from predators. And, they are very convincing. When I bent down for a closer look, it dropped from the leaf to the ground. When I reached down to open its wings for a better look, it seemed to play dead, or perhaps it intentionally remained still like bird poop.

I left the moth alone and just before I exited the property, I heard the faint eerie but meditative cooing of a mourning dove. When I entered this place at 4:45 a.m. this morning,

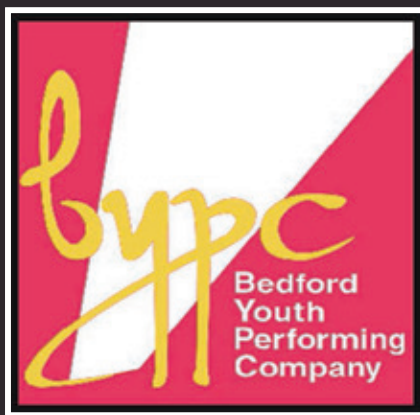
I heard the plaintive "fee-bee" call of a chickadee. Now, leaving this place, listening to the cooing of a mourning dove, I wondered which sound is more beautifully quaint. But, I stopped myself and instead considered how lucky I am that both sounds exist.



Boardwalk

A resident of Amherst, Tom Sileo is a Financial Advisor with a passion for the outdoors and local history. He has written hundreds of articles and columns on the outdoors and five books: *The photos used in this article were taken by the author at the properties mentioned.*

Due to a scheduling conflict, Parts I and II were published in *The Amherst Citizen* July 29 and August 26, respectively.



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