

Cats are people proxies in the bird world

- Rob Lee

Saturday, February 26, 2005



Assuming center stage, at the edge of the roof, he held forth for the next two hours, singing the same complex passage over and over. Not obviously sorrowful, the house finch's song was very intense and specific and unlike any I had ever heard; a heartfelt outpouring whose import seemed obvious, and delivered with a dignified persistence not to be ignored. A cat had stalked down the alley with the finches' mate in its mouth, prompting the bird's long soliloquy.

This incident left me feeling dreadful, as I had drawn the birds to my garden, where this neighborhood cat could prey on them. I intensified my hazing of the cats, to keep them away, feeling like the cruel giant of fairy tales. But, as I am largely absent from the garden, the cats mostly rule, as evidenced by the telltale little piles of dirt in the flower beds hiding their "gifts." How is it that cats have the run of my garden and, if I ask neighbors to please keep them away, my request is met with derisive laughs?

A recent study in Wisconsin estimated that rural, domestic cats kill about 39 million birds a year in that state. Adding the kills of feral and domestic, urban and suburban cats would obviously increase this number greatly. Extrapolating the Wisconsin figure to the whole country easily puts the number into the hundreds of millions. (And this is only one among many human threats to birds.) So how do we address this problem? Easy. Keep domestic cats in the house and capture feral cats. If one would like guidance toward the welfare of both cats and birds a good place to start is the American Bird Conservancy's Cats Inside program at www.abcbirds.org.

But what's the underlying reason people give their cats free rein in the first place? I believe it's because cats belong to people, and the Biblical God, in Genesis, gave us "dominion" over the Earth. As the planet is ours to do with as we wish, and cats are extensions of our divinely sanctioned hegemony, cats are free to do as they wish also.

Cats can spoil gardens and kill innumerable birds because it is the right of humans, masters of cats and the universe, to reign. The only problem with this formulation is that this notion of a human right of "dominion" is profoundly foolish, a classic example to not thinking through the consequences of an idea.

How is it possible to claim dominion over that upon which we are dependent -- as humans surely are to Earth -- and muddle destructively onward without questioning this assumption? How can we be this stupid, especially in the face of the gathering of so many dire environmental problems? It's as if a very clever fetus sought to dominate its mother by systematically poisoning her. The fetus would gain control just in time to die. Imagine the level of antagonism and alienation, or worse, indifference, the fetus would have to feel to do such an awful, insane thing. A science fiction monster for sure.

I once lived in a place where we ate outside all summer and the Steller's jays stole from your plate if you so much as cast a sidelong glance. The alpha cat -- our hero -- had a masterful technique for catching jays. A jay would jump around the long, empty table after lunch, looking for crumbs. The cat made an exaggerated show of sauntering away. When she reached the table's end she'd slip under, where the jay couldn't see her, and run back, underneath the table, pop up and snatch the jay off the table's edge. She caught a jay almost every day. We were delighted at her success. We were fledgling Buddhists, but still very much under Biblical sway, unable to make friends with the jays, or see our cruelty play out through the cat.

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