

## Watching Nature in the Backyard

One of the advantages of writing a nature column and also being retired is that you can take a cold drink out on the back porch and sit and think about a column and call it work. It is also one of the more enjoyable parts of my day.

As of this writing, the baby barn swallows are not so baby anymore—they are now taking their first flights. But now there is not much room on the nest rim for the parents so they are feeding by what I would call the “touch and go” method—flying in and dropping off their catch while on the wing and taking off again.

Of course feeding is not the only parental duty. With all the food being brought in, it stands to reason that a lot of waste is being generated and so the parents have to “take out the trash” as well.

The barn swallows are not the only birds feeding juveniles. I don't have a view of any of the other birds' nests, so what I do get to see is the parents feeding already-fledged young ones. The latter have learned the universal “feed me” posture of head down and fluttering of wings to beg for food. I see this most often on our platform feeder which I keep supplied with sunflower seeds. The list of birds that can be counted on to visit this feeder daily includes cardinals, titmice, house finches, lesser goldfinches, chickadees, and scrub jays.

The whitewing doves would very much like to participate in the fun at the platform feeder, but to discourage these voracious critters, I have a wire mesh cover over the platform that allows all of the above birds' easy access, but keeps out the whitewings. But the doves do spend a lot of time trying to figure out a way to get in.

Feeding is not the only bird activity one can watch from our back porch. Most all of the above birds can be seen drinking from our artificial “creek” several times a day. I suspect if you ate mainly dry seeds with an occasional bug, you might want a drink every now and then also.

Birds are not the only activity we can watch from our back porch. We usually have anywhere from one to four or more squirrels in the back yard. Of the various bird-feeders we have, only one can be accessed by the squirrels. The one feeder that they can get to requires them to climb out on a certain limb of our big post oak and jump down onto the “roof” of a small feeder that I fill every day, mainly for the squirrels, although when no squirrel is using it, birds like it too. When on the roof, the squirrels have to hold onto the roof by their back legs and hang down to reach the seeds below.

One amusing activity to watch is when one squirrel is on the feeder and another jumps down from the limb on top of him. Sometimes the jumper falls off and sometimes the first squirrel falls off. Occasionally we have a squirrel athletic enough to reach the bottom of the feeder by jumping from the ground.

Last fall we began to notice a number of burrows having been dug in various places around the yard. We suspected armadillos, but didn't see any in the late fall or winter. But recently I saw activity in some tall grass and flowers in the yard that I suspected to be an armadillo and went out to investigate. What I found was not one, not two, but three juvenile armadillos foraging around in the leaf litter. (Armadillos usually have four identical quadruplets!) A few days later we also found the momma going into one of the burrows.

While quietly sitting on the porch recently, I watched one of the young rolling in a wet spot in the flower bed like a little hog until it was completely covered with mud. The great thing about armadillos is that if you are quiet and still, they pretty much ignore you and/or don't know you are there.

We also have a huge population of queen butterflies nectaring on Gregg's mistflowers just off the porch. I recently watched a (presumably, second-generation) Monarch butterfly on the blooms of a Texas (or white) milkweed just off the porch.

Nature is fun to watch!

Until next time...

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