

Wekiva: a Non-stop Flight



Swamp Stump near Blackwater Creek

6/18/03

One morning last week a complete set of mockingbird feathers was spread out across our driveway, mostly the little curly ones you could make a fluffy pillow out of, but others, long and thin, with black and white definitions indicating a full-grown singer. Even when they're not singing, the front yard is always full of their variations and all this week, morning and evening, I have taken the time to listen to the song of the survivors. Every individual mockingbird represents a successful line of the whole species and its history.

Today one sits in our oak, then moves across the street to the old TV antenna on Bert's house and rattles off his repertoire. Up the street and over a pitch, it seems like a second mocker is responding, with only a slight time delay, the same sequence. A third bird down the street near Gary and Pat's house chatters away and a fourth, farther to the south, I can just barely hear.

It makes you wonder, if you could fly, how far over central Florida this chorus of mockers would extend, if indeed they are acting in species consort.¹ I imagine pockets of mocking-song interrupted here and there by a corresponding matrix of leaf-blowers and grass cutters. Noise doesn't matter, though, because the mockers' capacity for song seems endless, notwithstanding the cats, the barred owls, and the ospreys who live and hunt on our street.

The mockingbirds are a part of my neighborhood and because I spend many hours working in the front yard—they almost never go in the back—we have come to know each other. They used to perch (and poop) on our mail box all the time, until I planted a cherry tree on the opposite side of the driveway, right near the road. Now they croon from there. It's higher and they have greater visibility.

They also like to come to our tall river birch when I am sitting under it, resting from my gardening. I am happy for all the creatures who cohabit suburbia with me. When this land on the south shore of Lake Maitland was an orange grove, the mockers were here. Before that it was their longleaf pine and sandhill community. Their song still stitches up all this history like a fine old quilt.

*The most
precious things of
life are near at hand without
money and without price. Each of us
has the whole wealth of the universe at
our very door. All I ever had, and still
have, may be yours by stretch-
ing forth your hand
and taking
it.*

John Burroughs
(1837-1921)

It might seem strange to open a book about the Wild and Scenic Wekiva River with a discussion of the most common of birds, one not often seen in the swamp or from a canoe floating down the main stream. But the mocker is there to remind me and you, dear reader, that every suburb is on some river, just as much as every wilderness is already some critter's neighborhood.

The song of the state bird, the smallest spring pool of the river, the tracks of the heron in the sandy bottom of a shore line, and the flight of the swallow-tailed kite, all have the same features

¹ "The dawn chorus is one of the most conspicuous vocal behaviors of birds, and one of the least understood," according to BirdScope, Cornell Lab of Ornithology's newsletter for Spring, 2004. Mockingbirds are not mentioned.

of continuity that betoken life everywhere. The wild is not remote, only familiar or strange in particular features, depending on the amount of our experience. And scenic? That's a word for tourists and postcards. We need a new word for how our place sinks into us with its down-to-earth splendors, night and day. The Wild and Rooted River, perhaps.

My words are chattering out now from a beautiful, restful inner space. I perch on river places and life-posts to sing to my neighbors and to all others who yearn for good neighborhood. Even a century after you and I are gone, there can be new neighbors to awaken to the wilderness in their backyards, along the river's stream, in their hearts and souls. Gerard Manley Hopkins, England's finest earth-poet, called it *inscape* and sought to capture its magical rhythms:

*As kingfishers catch fire, dragonflies draw flame;
As tumbled over rim in roundy wells
Stones ring; like each tucked string tells, each hung bell's
Bow swung finds tongue to fling out broad its name;
Each mortal thing does one thing and the same:
Deals out that being indoors each one dwells;
Selves—goes itself; myself it speaks and spells,
Crying What I do is me: for that I came....*