

Hatching

When you walk into the Wild Bird Center, the first thing you notice is the warm, woody fragrance of birdseed. Along the wall to your right are four towering stacks of bags, each one corresponding to a special type of seed: black oil sunflower, hulled sunflower, safflower, and a blend of millet, split peanuts, hulled, and un-hulled sunflower called Birdwise. On a well-stocked day, these stacks can reach a whopping ten feet, which explains the storeowner Pete's anxiety about them falling on customers. As you wander about, you see more varieties of seed piled up beneath an extensive display of wind chimes. Here you find bags of peanuts, nyjer, millet and Patiwise – the store's most popular blend. On the opposite wall are shelves of birdhouses; some are more traditional in appearance, while others resemble old southern manors. On the floor beneath these shelves, you notice that there are even owl and bat houses. As you pass the suet cakes, tube feeders, and mounting poles, you may start to feel a bit like a lost fledging. When I first started working here, I felt the exact same way.

In the summer of 2012, I was in desperate need of work. I had just finished my first year of college, and I was less than enthusiastic about the prospect of lifeguarding at a small hotel pool (as I had done for the past three summers). At the behest of my parents – who were becoming less tolerant of my late-morning/early-afternoon wake up routine - I scoured craigslist for alternative job offers and interview opportunities. After a long day of metro rail transit and application submitting, I arrived back on my street, where I found my neighbor Pete walking his dog. Ever since high school, my neighborhood friends and I had been wary of Pete. We always saw him as the grumpy old man who had it out for us and our late night frisbee games. If he had something to say to you, it usually was not good. Now, with Pete making his way towards me, I looked around frantically for an escape route, but it was too late.

“I hear you’re in need of work”, he said, a half-smug smile dancing across his face.

The next day, I woke up at 9 AM (maniacally early by my standards) to get ready for my first day of work at the Wild Bird Center. I was still surprised that Pete had offered me a position at his store; perhaps he wasn’t such a grumpy guy after all. When his car pulled up outside, I gathered my belongings and gritted my teeth as my delighted mother ushered me out the door. With the exception of the banter on NPR, the drive into to Rockville was quiet. I chose to respect Pete’s reticence, but the silence only made me more worried about my first day on the job. The extent of my bird knowledge could be scrawled on a piece of fortune cookie paper, but here I was, on my way to work at a store designed specifically for avid birders. When we finally pulled into the barren shopping center parking lot, my anxiety folded its wings and nestled down. For the time being, I would be fine.

When Pete unlocked the front door to the store and flipped on the lights, I felt the shadow of intimidation hovering over me like a vulture. *All these different types of seed*, I thought to myself. *How am I ever going to learn which kinds attract which birds?* Luckily, the cashiering system was easy to use, but this alone could not compensate for my lack of bird knowledge. While the register was booting up, Pete began showing me around the store. “This is all the seed we’ve got for now,” he said, gesturing over the stacks. “If someone comes in asking for a fifty pound bag of safflower or sunflower hearts, write down their name and tell them I’ll be placing a special order on Thursday.” He showed me a laminated sheet of barcodes so I could ring up customers buying seed.

As we walked to the feeder section, Pete began discussing the pros and cons of various types of feeders. “Platform feeders attract all types of seed-eating birds, which is both a good

thing and a bad thing. The good news is that as long as you consistently fill the feeder, you'll see a lot of birds in your yard. The bad news is that grackles and starlings will start to bully off the smaller birds once they discover the buffet you laid out for them”.

“Can't squirrels get onto those kinds of feeders as well?” I asked, recalling days long past when my family kept a platform feeder in our backyard. The long, torpedo-shaped baffle we placed on the feeder's pole did nothing to prevent the squirrels from devouring all our seed.

“Yes, they can. But here's a little something I like to tell my customers,” said the storeowner, pausing for dramatic effect. “Squirrels pay my rent. “

When we arrived at the tube feeders, I was still grappling with Pete's words. *What did he mean squirrels pay his rent?* Hanging down from a special display hook before me was a clear plastic tube feeder, about two feet tall. The feeder had a green plastic perching area that encircled its base; a small, plush squirrel dangled from it by the tail. Noticing my interest in the contraption, Pete invited me to touch the perch. I pressed down lightly on the green plastic and – ZIP! The perch whirled around, flinging the toy squirrel halfway across the store. “That's the Squirrel Buster Plus™, the best squirrel-proof feeder on the market. Every one of my loyal customers owns one.” As we moved on, I caught a glimpse of the price tag on the feeder. Pete's motto made a lot more sense now.

Just as my brief tour was wrapping up, the front door swung open, dragging in the doughy aroma of the neighboring SUBWAY. Pete retreated to his office in the back, leaving me to fend for myself. My first customer – a tiny old lady with curly grey hair and cartoonishly large sunglasses- approached the register without glancing around. “The birdies are ravenous this week!” she exclaimed, beaming. “I'll have two bags of safflower, please”. As I fumble about

with the finicky barcode scanner, the wide grin remained plastered on her face. “There’s a family of cardinals living in my holly tree”, she chirped excitedly.

“Oh that’s very nice! Your total is \$42.39, could I give you a hand wi-”

“The tree grows just outside my living room window, so I can see right into the nest! I’ve been watching since they built it! The babies are getting big now, so the parents are trying to get them to fly. Sometimes, the mother will bring back a worm to coax them towards the edge of the nest. It’s only a matter of days before they fledge!” As the tiny woman chattered on –unfazed by the bewildered expression on my face - I could not help but wonder if these kinds of monologues were commonplace at the Wild Bird Center. When she removed her massive sunglasses and put her purse on the counter, I could tell that this was just the beginning of a longwinded avian soliloquy.

After twenty minutes of sustained bird talk, I had absorbed so much information about this woman’s backyard bird activity that I could have written a book about it. She told me everything from the number of pileated woodpeckers she’d seen in the last month (three) to how often she refilled her Squirrel Buster Plus™ (every two days, which I later learned to be quite frequent). Between my vigorous nods and occasional “uh-huh”s, I thought to myself *why was this woman so excited about birds?* I expected the customers to be enthusiastic about birding, but this relentless chatter seemed a little extreme. By the time she picked up her bags and left, I felt like my brain had been carried off in the talons of a condor. Would all of my customer interactions be like this?

The following hour was slow, so I took it upon myself to read as much as I could about birds. I grabbed three guidebooks from the shelves in the back of the store and began

flipping through them. Some of these birds I had never even heard of- Indigo buntings, Tufted titmice, Purple martins – but eventually I stumbled upon something familiar: the Northern cardinal. According to the book, the cardinal is predominantly a ground-feeding bird, which means that about 90% of their sustenance comes from grass, weeds, and flowers. I tucked this fact away in my mind for future reference. The book also stated that during the courting process, male cardinals feed their mates beak to beak, and that they are territorial around their nests. This information was engrossing, but I still could not make sense of the fervent feathered-friend fandom I witnessed earlier. Were all the patrons at this store as bird-bonkers as that little old lady?

Just as this thought took flight, the front door swung open. The man who came in looked to be in his early-thirties, a few decades shy of the typical birder age demographic. Before I could offer to help him, he stuck out a hand and introduced himself. It turned out this was Pete's son, Mike, who also happened to be the general manager of the store. "How's the first day treating you so far?" he asked, setting down his belongings.

"Thankfully it's been pretty slow. I don't know a whole lot about birds, so I'm trying to get some information under my belt." I said, gesturing at the guidebooks strewn across the counter.

"You won't need to worry too much about that," Mike reassured me. "For these first few days you'll just be ringing people up. The customer assistance side of the job takes time to get used to." The store phone rang, and Mike picked up. "Good morning, Wild Bird Center of Rockville, how can I help you? No, sir. No, we don't sell pigeons. We carry bird feeders, bird baths, and bird seed, not actual... What was that? I don't believe can buy pigeons in

Maryland...I'd say your best bet is a pet shop... You can probably get some parakeets, but I wouldn't count on pigeons. That's fine... You're welcome. Have a nice day, sir." He hung up and turned to me again. "Every now and then, someone will call in asking for real birds. You'll get used to that too."

By the end of my first summer at the Wild Bird Center, Mike's encouraging words proved true. To the average customer, I could easily pass as a birder. I spoke with authority on the seed preferences of various birds; I knew the proper sugar/water ratio for hummingbird feeders (one part sugar to four parts water); and my bird identification skills were improving. I had even discovered an organization for bird-seeking callers to contact! Despite all of this newly acquired bird-credibility, I still could not call myself a birder. I was missing something crucial, something that I would see in certain customers' eyes or hear in their voices. There was some distinguishing feature that set birders apart from those who simply knew about birds, but I could not put my finger on what it was. All I knew was that I did not have it.

Sometimes, on my way to the Campus Center, I stop by St. John's Pond and watch the mallards. Whether they're making a boisterous, quacking landing or feeding upside down with their tail feathers in the air, they never fail to make me chuckle. Occasionally, I'll laugh loudly - loud enough to spook a fellow pedestrian or warrant a strange look or two. It is in these moments of joy and hilarity that I feel my inner birder hatching.