

Kinder, Gentler

There's often a hard edge to New Year's resolutions. A punitive subtext. A get with it, do more, do better tone. If ever there was a year for a kinder, gentler take on being our best selves, 2024 might just be it.

I am not a birder, not by a stretch, though I am devoted to the winged victories that inhabit my feeders. I try my best to distinguish between, as birdwatchers refer to them, the LBBs (Little Brown Bird) or LBJs (Little Brown Job), the look-alike small brown passerines. I can identify some of the most common species: Steller and Scrub Jays, Mourning and Ring-necked doves, Cassin's finch with its happenin' red crew cut. And during warmer weather, the Evening Grosbeak is hard to miss with its impressive schnoz and fierce yellow eyebrow.

A couple of weeks ago the big news from a birder friend was that a flock of Pine grosbeaks had been spotted on Vicksburg Avenue. I manage a tentative "Wow?" I'd never heard of a Pine grosbeak. I look them up in my bird book. Turns out the Pine is a fancy finch, while the Evening grosbeak is cousin to the cardinal. Real birders know this stuff and more. (To wit, a 2022 Time magazine article references birder [Joan Straussmann](#) who can "rattle off trivia about birds as quickly as a Peregrine falcon can blast through the sky." Who knew that "...Northern flickers coax their young to leave their nests by continuously shrieking? That American coots sometimes sneak eggs into other hens' nests? That white brows on a male white-throated sparrow indicate he might be a philanderer?")

I read about the Pine grosbeak's summer preference for pine forests. Maybe I'd seen them in the Cascades while hiking? Maybe in winter at feeders serving up sunflower seeds? They are certifiably plump, their beak is stubbier than the Evening grosbeak's, their head rounder. The male wears a reddish cloak over his head and chest, like chain mail made of tiny feathers. The female's version—a pale yellow shawl. Both have contrasting gray wings with white bars. They aren't supposed to be all that hard to spot. Maybe, I think, I'll go look for them tomorrow.

"Tomorrow" is one of those carefully choreographed days: gym, deadlines, errands. Do more, do better. Adding a bird quest into the mix would be the anthesis of efficiency, and the more relaxed time of day is after bird bedtime. I make my way to Vicksburg anyway, between bank and before groceries. A mini-mutiny. My attention turns to the sky: ducks, geese, a flock of smaller birds doing acrobatics far overhead. Could they be...? I pull over and stop, adjust my binoculars. No idea.

My heart rate and MPH both slow as I poke around side streets, study the treetops. Top-down is a refreshing perspective on the town I'd lived in for so long. Given the inexplicable fun this is, I feel compelled to recruit everyone I see. Here comes a couple, she with walking sticks, he pulled along by an over-eager dog. I roll down my window. "I hear there's a flock of Pine grosbeaks in your neighborhood. Have you seen them?" Though they confess they wouldn't know one if they did, they prattle enthusiastically about the [popularity of their bird feeder](#) as winter sets in. Next, a

woman with two large German shepherds who both give me a no-false-moves look. No, she hasn't seen the grosbeaks, but "How exciting! I'll keep an eye out!"

When do I stop and randomly talk to strangers? Who knew an impromptu birding expedition would produce a heightened sense of community? Look how a small, feathered common cause is a bridge to friendly conversation. I continue on my lollygagging way, beguiled by the gentleness of being off-purpose, the lock step of my schedule giving way to something ineffable. Who says the shortest distance between two points is a straight line?

Unbeknownst to me, I was verifying a host of studies on the beneficial effects of birdwatching or, in my case, bird looking-for. One, published in "Scientific Reports," found that seeing or hearing birds [improved mental wellbeing](#) for up to eight hours. The National Institutes of Health maintain birdwatching increases oxytocin secretion, results in more efficient brain activity. If that's true, I should accomplish my remaining errands more efficiently than ever and love doing them. Sometimes you go faster when you take your foot off the gas.

I never spotted the Pine grosbeak. But that isn't the point. A kinder, gentler New Year is, however that looks for you. May it include birdsong.