

Birding on the Run

Magic Happens When You Stretch Out Under a Tree and Do Nothing

I've been running since the end of July 2010, seven—and then, when my shins barked back, six—days a week. It was nothing I ever thought I could or would do. I thought I hated running. But I watched daughter Phoebe, a lissome 14, take off down the sidewalk each morning and come back breathless and glowing. I saw her glory in what her young body could do, and I decided to go with her a couple of times. By the second morning, I concluded that I should run alone. Watching your 5'8", 102-pound daughter disappear deerlike around a curve as you puff and labor behind is no motivation for new runners.

Gradually the soreness and infirmity of unaccustomed exertion dropped away, and I felt a new center of balance forming in my body and life.

I surprise myself, looking forward to each morning's run like a racehorse wanting its workout. By anyone's standards, I am slow; I'm more perpetual motion machine than athlete. Nobody is going to mistake me for Zenyatta. Running in the predawn darkness, I listened as the birds of summer grew quiet until only a single towhee was left, singing a bell-clear *drrrrink your sweet teaaaaa y'all!* from a wooded swale. I was grateful for that towhee, looked forward to his serenade each morning, and felt bereft when even he fell silent.

But then migration time came along in August, and being out in the clammy cool before dawn took on a whole new meaning. I began to hear voices drifting down from above—thrush voices. Hundreds and hundreds of thrushes, flying for weeks on end through September and into October.

My Boston terrier, Chet Baker, no pup at six, has run every mile with me, and he glows with power-packed health. We started out with a collar and leash, for the cars, cattle, and neighbors' dogs along the way. Six months later, he runs without so much as a collar, responding to voice commands alone, powering along past temptations he'd never have been able to ignore in the beginning.

It has been good.

Most mornings, Chet and I end up in a small church cemetery about two miles into the route. We collapse on the short fine grass amidst leaning gravestones. I stared up into an arbor vitae one late November day, expecting nothing and receiving everything. First, a pair of tufted titmice, scolding and jeering as they scrabbled in the bark just overhead. Two white-breasted nuthatches, talking softly together. Five robins, then three bluebirds, my thrush companions for the winter, now that their brown cousins had fled. Silently as falling leaves, a pair of brown creepers swept onto the silver trunk, circling it once, then flying off together. A blue jay landed in its top, voicing an odd call I'd never heard before. Big brother crow, circling low, cawing at me as if he'd never seen a reclining person before. Out of nowhere, a pileated woodpecker swooped up into the top of the arbor vitae, wanting to see what the crow saw. His topknot blazed in the sun as he tossed his head, then erupted in clucks as he flapped away, clean

white underwings flashing. By now I was laughing outright, amazed and thoroughly amused by this parade.

Needless to say, having a pair of binoculars bouncing against my torso is out of the question. Nice as it would have been to have them, I didn't have time to mourn my binoculars. No sooner had the woodpecker cackled away to the north than the lusty scream of a red-shouldered hawk broke the silence.

I craned my neck to see this new player on my private sunlit stage. She caught the slightest motion of my leg—you don't hide from a hawk!—and was so shocked to discover me right beneath her that she crouched, then sprang straight up into the air, breaking her perch clean off with a gunshot crack. She tumbled, then gathered herself; the limb careened down; I hooted with delight, and Chet, who'd been trembling silently by my side through the entire show, bounded over, woofing, to see the startled hawk off.

I rolled over onto my stomach, laughing helplessly, resolving to take the time to lie down more often, to throw myself blindly out into the morning and onto the grass, waiting for nothing—and everything—all at once.

Julie Zickefoose, *Bird Watcher's Digest*