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President's Message

For the past few weeks my life-outside-of-birding (does such a thing exist?) got very busy, took over my daily schedule, and left me precious little time to grab my binoculars and head into the field. Withdrawal symptoms set in, staved off only by an occasional brief foray on what seemed like borrowed time. I grew anxious for the feather quest, for an immersion into the world of birding. How could life go on without a chance to bird?

My survival strategy was to make the most of what I call "contact birding." That's the term I use for the bird watching that happens when you aren't out intentionally birding. You go out and about on some other business and, whether by good luck alone or perhaps simply by paying attention, you come into contact with some birds.

I was skeptical that any contact birding would present itself here in the middle of Chicago in late winter. The prospects seemed grim without a few hours to spend at the lake front, a few hours I did not have. But opportunities did arise.

Some were humble. While standing in frigid cold, waiting for an el train to take me downtown, I watched a fellow rider toss peanuts to the House Sparrows on the platform. The birds bounced about, each following his or her strategy for snagging a share of welcome loot. Several folks on the platform watched with me, and made comments on the evident differences in each bird's individual personality. Some were bold, some sneaky, but all were fluffed up against the cold, even covering their legs with their feathers.

Other opportunities were less mundane. While shoveling snow and chipping ice off the walk in back of the house, some desperate squeaking from up above caught my attention. There on a neighboring roof top one of the local kestrels had caught herself a meal and was dispatching her prey. My upstairs neighbor was with me and I pointed the falcon out to her. We put our snow shovels aside to watch. Betsy commented how this kestrel looked a different color from the one my wife and I pointed out to her a month before. And so she learned about the sexual dimorphism in kestrels.

These bits and pieces of contact birding may not be much, but they serve to remind me that there really is no life-outside-of-birding. Bird life goes on and on, waiting to be observed, wherever and whenever.

— Geoffrey A. Williamson

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