

VILLAGE VIEW

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Hot, humid summer days aren't especially conducive to great thoughts. Instead of one subject coming into my head upon which to expand at length, my mind refuses to limit itself to a single theme. It's restless and, like the wind, squally, veering now from the east, now from the south.

On the trunk of a pitch pine a small gray bird proceeds in its hunt for insects. It resembles a nuthatch, but since it ascends the trunk instead of coming down, head first, I assume it's a pine creeper.

Isn't it remarkable how little difference it makes whether Big League baseball is played? Let's hope we can as easily find a substitute for postal services if the employees go on strike. A first class letter to Boston from Barnstable recently took 15 days to get delivered.

The birdbaths have been filled five times today; a steady parade of feathered creatures comes and goes. Chickadees wait in the wings while purple grackles, robins, blackbirds, blue jays and starlings exercise a might-is-right monopoly. Between visits of the more aggressive birds, finches come to share the water, four or five at a time. Even the towhees fly in to slake their thirst.

The woodland is noisy with quail whistling Bob White from all points of the compass; quail is one bird I never see at the birdbath. I know where there's a quail's nest with eight eggs in it. Quail eggs are smaller than I'd expected, and pure white. The female lays as many as a dozen eggs in the course of ten days or so, but doesn't begin sitting on them until she has a full clutch. Something tells her the eggs must all hatch at the same time if she to bring up her brood safely, so she waits until her laying is done before she settles herself to her task.

If Shell strikes oil on Georges Bank, where will it be stored? Tankers full of oil are anchored off the coast and are running in circles at sea in these days of "oil glut."

A starling is hogging the birdbath; a jay and a robin are waiting, diving in, trying to frighten the starling who stands his ground. Working together, two jays succeed in rousting him, but the robin takes center stage before the jays establish possession. The robin flies; both jays share the bath, then go. The starling (it may be a different one) replaces them. The water is low again.

My vegetable gardens (the ones I dug, composted, and edged with rotting pine logs to support the extra-rich compost that raised them above the surrounding surface) are producing. I started calling that area of the yard "the farm," but now I'm referring to it as the "funny farm," because the compost contains viable seed from materials I added to the heap last summer, or perhaps the summer before. As a result, in addition to the seedlings I raised and transplanted when the ground warmed up in June, there are unidentified volunteers.

I planted no zucchini, but zucchini is growing. I planted no butternut squash, but I think butternut squash is developing. I suspect one squash-like vine may yield spaghetti squash at harvest-time. It's fine with me.

String beans are big enough to pick; cucumbers are four or five inches long. This year I chose to plant bush cucumbers instead of vines. Last year the vines did nothing. This year's bushes are bearing beautifully.

When the tomatoes begin to ripen, I'll need to do something drastic about the chipmunks. They seem to think I raise tomatoes for their exclusive benefit. Not so. A fine and friendly jet-black cat of the neighborhood stalks them vigilantly. Sure they're cute. But not when they beat me to my tomatoes.

A chickadee flits in and has a drink, but not a bath, before a catbird drives him off. After a sixth filling with fresh clean water, it takes the birds fully 30 seconds to venture back into the birdbath after I return to the house. The first to arrive are a pair of starlings. Such a splashing and showering! Although awkward greedy birds, they do eat Japanese beetle grubs.

Why can't the legislature pass the budget? Shouldn't there be some incentive, something built in, to persuade them to finish in a timely fashion? Maybe their salaries should be docked every day they're late. Senators, representatives and the governor must eventually reach a compromise, and they all know it.

Meanwhile helpless people suffer. It's not right. Nor is it right that doorkeepers at the State House are paid higher wages than police and firemen upon whom our safety depends. Most of us prefer to open doors for ourselves. Who needs doorkeepers? Only the patronage dispensers.

This morning a wasp or bee with a bright red tail-section was working the squash blossoms. I've never seen one like it before. Honey bees, bumblebees, little green wasps and big black mud-daubers are busy in the garden, and there are lots of butterflies, too.

A grey squirrel comes for a drink. Sitting on the edge of the birdbath and looking carefully around before testing the water, he then drinks for quite a long time. His tail flirts as he finishes, leaps to a tree trunk, and scrambles out of sight. Now I see him making his arboreal way through the treetops.

If four young men smash through the fence at Sandy Neck and then assault pursuing police officers and a ranger, sending several to the hospital with broken teeth and multiple bruises inflicted with tire irons, should they be released in their own recognizance after arraignment? If I were a policeman, I'd be resentful, angry, and discouraged about attempting to do assigned work. If I were a policeman assaulted with a tire iron, and got my teeth knocked out, I'd be tempted to use "deadly force" the next time I got into a fracas with unruly persons. I'd have made a poor policeman, I guess, but I'm grateful somebody's willing to assume that thankless job.

A robin in the birdbath sits in the very center and flaps water in all directions. Then he hops to the rim, flips his feathers, opens his beak, rotates his head, and scratches his chin with his left foot. Do you suppose he's left-footed? He preens under his right wing and behind his shoulderblades, returns to the bath for a final flutter, and departs. His place is taken by three starlings at once, two females, one male. Ignoring one another, all flutter at once. Away they fly.

All those flying gypsy moths seem to have disappeared completely. Perhaps my neighbor, who hung traps equipped with the sex lure to attract the males of the species, has saved us from next summer's devastation by the creepy-crawly caterpillars. We shall see.

The water surface in the birdbath is calm now. The tree leaves, overhead, cast shadows, making the water look dark and deep, but the birds know it's not.

Oh, here come the cardinals!