

FROM THE CATBIRD'S SEAT

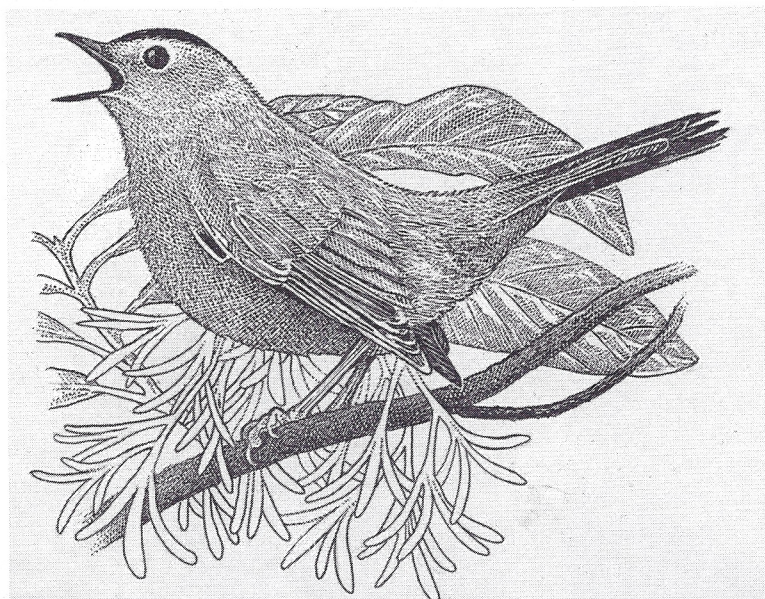
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The first day of spring is technically March 21st, but my start date is when the first Gray catbird sings. This backyard friend, a far more amiable tenant than its aggressive cousin, the mockingbird, returns to our area from its wintering grounds sometime during the latter part of April. I don't know where these catbirds spend the winter—somewhere in the Southeastern US, Mexico, the Caribbean, or Central America. The species has a broad off-season range. But usually by the first week of May, this charmer, with its black cap, understated dark grey suit, and rufous vent, settles in for the breeding season in my garden. Now I have Gray catbirds, Carolina wrens, and lots of warblers as neighbors in the spring.

This wasn't always the case. About ten years ago, after living in Cabin John since 1994, I surrendered in the ultimate existential struggle of suburban life: I could no longer bear to maintain a grass lawn, or worse, devote part of every weekend to mowing it. Thus, I went native, planting a garden composed of indigenous wildflowers, shrubs, and trees. Part of my naturalist's rebellion against a backyard lawn was strictly educational—my desire to learn about the 1,805 plant species in our local flora. I figured the best way to do so was to grow as many as I could get my hands on and fit into the backyard. At one point, we had more than 500 species of natives: that was before the trees grew up, shading out a number of sun-loving plants, and before we fenced the trails, after allowing our two dogs to cause a number of stochastic extinctions with their tearing after rabbits and what my wife likes to call “those striped fellows”—the chipmunks.

It may seem obsessive, or evidence of a total lack of aesthetic taste, to cram so many plant



Gray Catbird sitting on a Virginia Fringe tree branch.

species into such a relatively tiny plot of land. Perhaps it was motivated by penance. A quote I heard decades earlier from the noted writer Michael Pollan had taken root in my brain: “A lawn is a garden under totalitarian rule.” At least in our region, he could have extended the metaphor to read: “A lawn is a garden under totalitarian rule and, in Maryland and much of the Mid-Atlantic states, maintained only by applications of toxic chemicals to kill ‘weeds,’ and doses of fertilizer that drain off into the Chesapeake Bay, and by contributing an unnecessary amount of hydrocarbons into the atmosphere, thereby exacerbating climate change, not to mention the noise pollution of gas-powered mowing and leaf-blowing machines.”

Here is a tip on local ecology 101: The native vegetation of our part of Maryland is, with rare exception, forest. To wish for some other condition for your yard, such as a lush green lawn populated by a monoculture of grass, you are fighting nature. Nature abhors vacuums and despises monocultures, and will try to disrupt them at the first toehold of a silver maple seedling sprouting in an unattended lawn. To suppress the forest from taking back your yard you must choose one of three options: 1) fill your yard as much

as is legally possible with infrastructure (house, garage, paved driveway, etc.) to avoid having a yard to care for in the first place (the developer's new trick); 2) try to arrest the invasion of tree seedlings by keeping the lawn mowed and applying a broad-leaved plant herbicide, or 3) plant a garden to replace the once-revered lawn.

Just as the catbirds begin their cat-like “mew” call, the males diversify into their repertoire of sing-song phrases that together mimic songs from those of other species: like mockingbirds and thrashers, catbirds are part of the family Mimicidae. It's about the same time of year that the whine of lawnmowers begins, too.

Consider this: American homeowners devote 70 hours annually to mowing their lawns or paying someone else to do it every few weeks. Technically, the point of this manicure is to trap the non-native grass cover in a state of prepubescence—that is, too young to reseed. It is estimated that we spend \$48 to \$82 billion annually on lawn and yard care, the high cost of trying to subvert the natural tendency written in grass genes to sprout and flower. In contrast, we only spend about \$50 billion annually

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LOCAL NATURE

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on foreign aid and a mere \$8 billion on conservation of natural areas. Further, 35,000 people including 4,800 children are treated annually for mower-related injuries—resulting in 600 amputations among the nation's youth.

Amputation—that is what it really requires to maintain grass lawns, all resulting in what has been described as “the perfect antithesis of an ecological system.”

According to University of Florida ecology and conservation professor Mark Hostetler, lawns produce no seeds, nectar, or fruit, so few creatures can use lawns as habitat. Biodiversity-wise, “it’s almost like concrete,” he wrote. I won’t go into the chemicals required to keep lawns green and free of other plants, but consider this the next time you see the yellow symbol advising you to keep your pet off your neighbor’s freshly treated lawn: young children share a lot of genes and physiology with dogs. Why do we

think the chemicals that are bad for dogs are not harmful to our children?

There is, thankfully, an aesthetically pleasing solution to the lengths homeowners will go to maintain their lawns. It is as simple as going to a native plant nursery and picking out what grows best in our area and attracts your eye. I love to plant shrubs that not only yield interesting flowers and fruits, but also have beautiful fall foliage.

If you share that taste, let me recommend American (not Japanese or Chinese) witch hazel. The American version blooms late in the fall, with gorgeous yellow stringy flowers, and offers an array of purple and pink leaves. I am into purples, so for me maple-leaved Viburnum, another native, has the most colorful fall foliage. Bright reds? Try black gum or the common red maple. But the prize winner could be the much overlooked Virginia fringe tree, a native in the olive

family. In Spring the fringe tree, where my catbird likes to roost, puts out a display of lacy white petals that gives the tree in your yard the appearance of a giant wedding gown for a few weeks.

In comments from Cabin John residents in this newsletter and beyond, many say that the reason they moved from the city to our hamlet was to feel closer to nature. I assume this means being where the catbird and the other dawn singers wake you up in the morning, instead of police sirens and car traffic. Remember, catbirds are made from insects and fruit. If you want to have these birds in your yard, plant natives that attract them and forego ecologically sterile lawns that offer no shelter or food at all. **VN**



MICKIE SIMPSON

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