

ID Yourself—Goldfinches!

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BIRD WATCHER'S DIGEST®



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THE BACKYARD

Tired and Feathered

An unexpected source of awe

Napping in front of the television on a cold December day, I woke to screeching sounds outside, calls echoing through the house.

Whatever it was, there were a lot of them, pounding into my eardrums with cacophonous screams. My beagle, Norman, was curled around my stomach, and as I sat up he raised his head, wide-eyed, ears alert, with one side of his upper lip still caught in his teeth. The intensity of the cries rang in my ears, and I knew it had to be 10 times as jarring for Norm. Neither of us could take it. We got up in unison, both wanting to know what had awakened us. What could possibly make such a horrible racket?

I looked into the front yard and saw a sea of black. Everything was black: my yard, the neighbor's yard, their neighbor's yard, the sky, the trees, endlessly black. A flock of migrating starlings had landed. As a

naturalist, I was shocked by the sheer number of the invasive birds. In 1890, an eccentric and wealthy German immigrant, Eugene Schieffelin, released about 60 European starlings in New York City—his motive being to introduce to North America all the birds mentioned in Shakespeare's writings. From those original 60, starlings have swarmed into a continent-wide plague of 200 million, devastating agriculture and outcompeting native species—like my bluebirds and robins—for food and nest space. Fall starling flocks can reach 100,000. The horde that landed in my yard in Charlotte, North Carolina, easily numbered 10,000.

I opened the front door slowly, trying not to startle the birds. All that separated Norman and me from them was the glass in the storm door. Their screams were louder now, and they were madly throwing

DAVID JOY

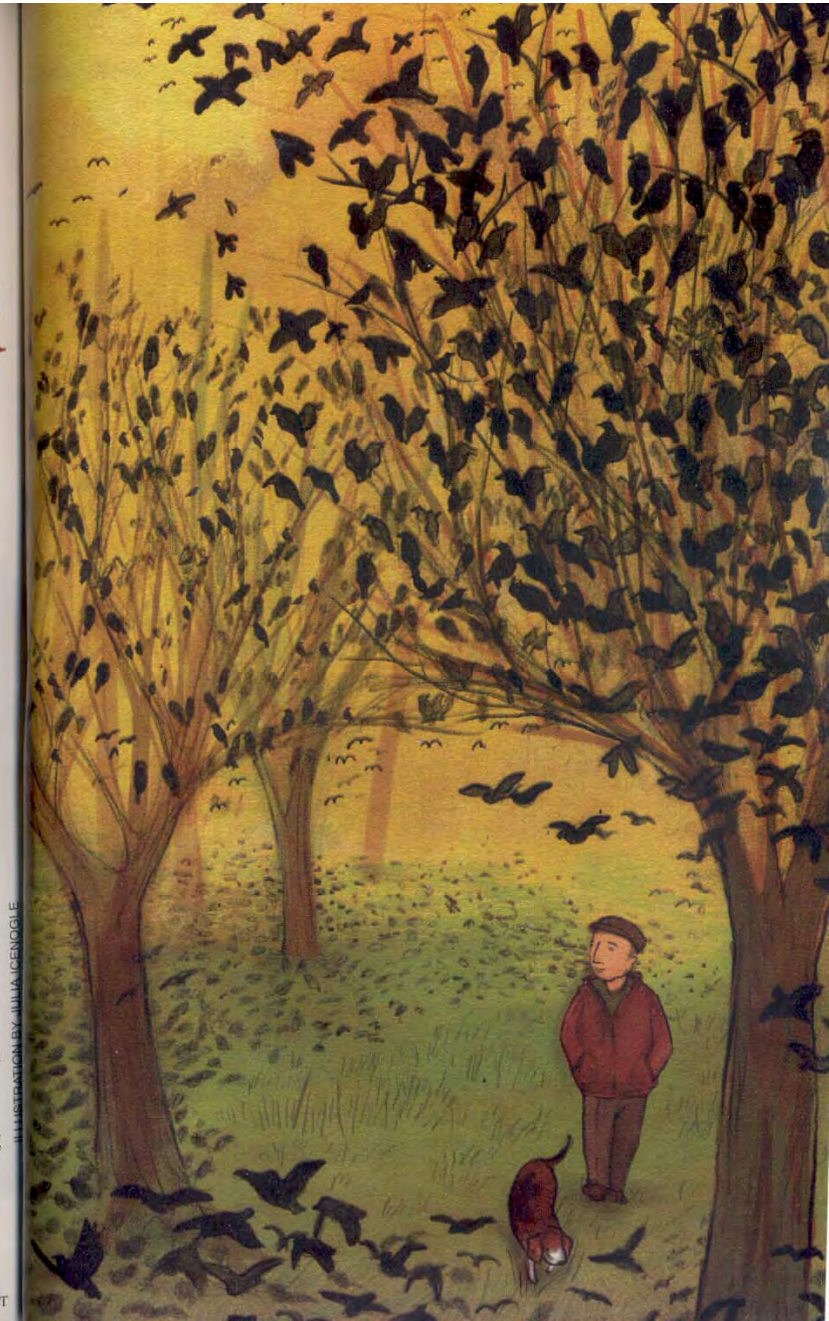


ILLUSTRATION BY JULIA GENOGLE

leaves into the air with their bills. There would be nothing left for the mockingbirds and finches that still came here daily. I had to do something. Norman stood at full attention, one paw raised, tail stiff, waiting on the signal. "Gettun," I commanded, simultaneously slamming down the handle to open the door. Norman took off in a blur of beagle, head down, yelping, interrupting the feast, almost snagging one of the birds as the murmuration took flight. The sound of that many birds taking off at once whooshed like a burst of wind pushing against a mountain bluff. Again, as a naturalist and stubborn preservationist, I was appalled—but as a human being, a witness of the wild, I stood in amazement.

I walked into the yard and looked overhead. The birds shattered the pale yellow sky into a dark cloud, hiding the light, creating night by numbers. As they landed in the naked trees, they made the oaks full again, feathers for foliage, saturated black. The sun was setting behind the hickories in an orange aurora, and still more birds flew in, breaking the sunset with their wings. I watched them land en masse in my neighbors' yards, foraging for anything that remained on the cold winter ground, creating chaos with their shoveling heads. When one bird couldn't find anything else to peck, it would spread its wings and take flight—and the rest would follow

suit as if scared they would be left behind, each time creating that same sensational sound as 20,000 wings beat against the winter air. I almost ran through them, wanting them to surround me, but I didn't move. I was spellbound, hoping they would never leave.

When the neighboring hillsides were pecked clean, the shrieking voices faded as the birds moved on to the cow pasture up the road. I searched my yard for feathers, hoping to find something left behind, proof that what I had seen really had happened, but all that was left were searing memories.

Then they came back, in waves, covering my yard, a swarm of shadows, pecking and pillaging—winged pirates. I wanted to climb into the oak tree in my front yard, hold tight and still, bite my tongue, and become a limb—let them shroud me in feathers, cloak me in darkness. Instead I just stood there smiling, holding in the laughter, awestruck. They stayed until nothing was left; I watched them come up from the earth in one giant stream like smoke rising from an oil fire. One last time, the sky was painted black, and then they were gone.

David Joy is a graduate student of creative writing at Western Carolina University. He grew up in Charlotte, North Carolina, and has made his home in Appalachia, where his relationship with the natural world continues to grow.

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