

FEBRUARY 23, 1984

Morning stillness covers the ranch like the dew. Orange sun rays fan across the eastern sky; dawn clouds absorb the glow in tones of rose and red. Sounds never rise above a cows' lowing to her calf.

By daybreak the creatures of the night, like the owls and raccoons, have gone to bed. Two hours before dawn, you can hear owls calling to their mates, concluding the night's hunt.

Man and owl watch each other with grave suspicion. In all our intellectual sophistication, we are still unsure that those haunting eyes and tufted horns don't have a secret power. Laugh if you like, but there'll always be a market for charms and stump water to drive away evil spirits.

To further honor each new day I feed birds by my kitchen window. I entice them to come close at hand. Yellow and black plaided vests strut by, followed by bright brown-neck scarves and fancy top notches.

Morning doves and blue quail and meadow larks fluff their feathers and peck along with greedy blackbirds and timid titmouses. I can't tell who is in charge. But I do see an obvious need for a pecking order to set the protocol of the different families that rush through their meal.

Yesterday I added stale bread to their usual feed of shelled com. Country birds can't handle the same food their city relations eat. Things that town birds thrive on causes serious trauma of the crow in the country dwellers. For example, a whiff of carbon monoxide stimulates a city park pigeon to great ambitions, but a mere taste of the fumes will send a rural bird reeling and staggering and gasping for air.

Any kind of pollution will kick off a wrenching, sneezing and coughing fit in a ranch bird. You'll understand this better if you'll remember that birds have to get around on two legs just like we do. As weak as their knees are, a deep cough is a serious matter with a bird, especially those long legged waterfowl. Birds have a tough time suppressing coughs and wheezes. I guess colds and influenza are about their most serious diseases.

Much in evidence among the birds that feed at the house are a large family of Texas sparrows. Though they descend from British stock, they've lived here so long that they no longer consider themselves English. Symptoms of their ancestry have all but disappeared. Other than lording their heritage over the other birds, they pass on unnoticed.

Sparrows of every type are overqualified for their jobs. Certainly they could build neater nests. It's simply that they have learned that man goes into a rage once streamers of grass and feathers, not to mention mites and lice, are brought into a new barn as a warming present

What sparrows need, I think, is to admit to being sparrows. Like sea gulls and house flies they've been trying to join man for centuries. We have too many pets as it is. Sparrows would be a lot more welcome if they'd lose some of their gall.

The quail are the first to leave the feed grounds. Quarrelsome blackbirds stay for the last kernel. Each morning opens adorned in dramatic colors, staged by a cast and props of nature's characters. And like those simple country birds, I like it just fine.