

The Baird Facts: Bird feeder follies

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Beverly Citizen

Posted Feb 04, 2010 @ 07:00 AM

Beverly, Mass. —

It all began when we visited my parents at their new home in Annapolis. Out their back windows, with hints of the Chesapeake Bay shimmering through the trees, they had three bird feeders. The feeders were well visited by finches and cardinals and woodpeckers and nuthatches and blackbirds, to name just a few. Watching them was soothing . . . in a northeast wintry sort of way. And it occurred to me that perhaps life wouldn't seem so overwrought and frantic, deadlines and grad school and children's activities so relentless, if only I had a modest bird feeder hanging outside my kitchen window.

"That way," I explained to my husband and parents, "when I'm in the kitchen, which is most waking moments of my at-home life, I can look out the window and watch the birds for a calming moment or two."

My husband nodded. I took this for agreement not only with my actions, but with the concept as a whole. After all, what wasn't to like?

And so my mother and I went to a funky and charming Annapolis birding store and entered into the world of feeders and poles and baths and seeds and books and all things avian.

"Well," remarked my mother, "I can see how *some* people could become obsessed with birds."

How fortunate then, that neither my mother, nor I, is prone to obsessive undertakings.

Thirty minutes later we stumbled out with Squirrel Busters (the name of the revolutionary new feeder utilizing weight-sensitive technology to, well, bust the squirrels) 5-pound bags of specialty bird seed and hanging devices. Naturally, we also added ourselves to the store e-mail list — never mind that I was out of state — and left with promises to return come spring to ready ourselves for the "nesting season."

Back in Beverly, I filled my Squirrel Buster with black saffron seed, which is apparently chocolate for birds. My husband drilled my hook into our deck, and I hung my feeder. I was ready to be soothed. I felt sure that I would meet with instant success since my backyard neighbor, a mere 50 feet away, had constant flocks at her feeder.

And yet, my bird feeder hung untouched . . . for days . . . and then weeks . . . and . . . I felt a hint of angst.

"I need a new pole!" I announced to my husband in a non-soothing tone. "The birds can't see my feeder, and obviously Beverly birds can't smell. I need a new pole that will hang my feeder up high!"

And so, I ordered a new, high, pole.

Meanwhile, our squirrels, who certainly *can* smell, discovered the feeder. We have three regular squirrels at Casa Baird. My daughters, for reasons beyond my adult comprehension, named them Slidey, Elizabeth-Slackey and Sweetie. Black saffron is apparently chocolate to them as well.

But remember, I'd purchased a Squirrel Buster. I wasn't feeding any birds, but neither was I feeding squirrels. Until, that is, Elizabeth-Slackey wised up. She realized that if she reached out from the deck railing and grabbed the outer edge of the Squirrel Buster with her front paws, she could reel herself, and the Buster, back to the railing. Once back,

she was able to quickly pull out a seed without putting any weight onto the feeder. Elizabeth-Slackey had busted my Buster.

I took to studying by the door so I could watch my feeder at every moment and defend it from the nimble squirrel triad. But no birds, and by that I mean not a single bird, were eating my seeds. I began tossing handfuls of seeds over the fence towards the neighbor's bird-fest. One time I even yelled, "Hey birds! I have seeds, look, seeds!" But not only can birds not smell, or follow a seed trail, they also don't seem to understand shrieky, stressed out, English.

I searched online for things to do and gritted my teeth at the experts who said that I needed to be patient. As in months? Was that patient enough? When there were hundreds of birds a mere 50 feet away? When I was providing bird chocolate and personally managing the squirrel problem?

I was not soothed.

And then one day, while studying doorside, a tufted titmouse lit upon my deck railing. I froze. It hopped and flitted over to the feeder and then gracefully landed on it, pecked out a seed and flew away.

It's never come back. But I'm sure it's only a matter of time now. Until then I'll just remain vigilant, ready to be soothed at any moment.

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