

Sherwood Island Diary

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Introduction

I am fortunate to have a permanent and powerful delight in observing wild birds in their natural setting. This passion has served me well over the years. Regardless of the vicissitudes and frustrations of life, I have always been able to pick up my binoculars, go outside, and derive pleasure. I owe this lucky trait to Miss Ida Claire, but for whose profound influence on my life, it might have gone forever undiscovered. When I was nine years old, Miss Claire led our elementary school class on a field trip to Central Park, mid Manhattan's wonderful denial of New York's concrete. Miss Claire was a bird-watcher and birds were the main objective of our quest. It was the middle of May and we recorded 16 species, in retrospect surely a record low. But one of those species was a male Scarlet Tanager, whose contrast with the green leaves of the willow in which he perched, remains in my memory. Four boys of that class immediately became bird-watchers. For three of us, watching birds developed into a life-long interest.

In 1944, when I was 11 years old, my parents decided to rent a "summer" house in "the country". They eventually settled on a large converted barn in Westport, Connecticut, about 45 miles northeast of our New York City apartment. Westport certainly doesn't qualify as "the country" now, but then it was a small, undeveloped community that had a particular attraction for people with artistic interests. Our house was situated on a six acre land parcel that was half-apple orchard, half overgrown field. In those days, a "summer" rental, in this case at a cost of \$500, meant April 1-October 30. I had been an avid bird-watcher for about two years, but until then, most of my birding had been done in New York City parks. No bird has ever gone through Central Park unnoticed, yet I had the notion that it wasn't quite the real thing if one saw it there. I loved old issues of the National Geographic Magazine and there was one from 1913 about birds in orchards that particularly influenced me. The fine colored prints by Louis Agassiz Fuertes inspired my imagination with a vision of the ideal and "natural" environment in which to see our common song birds and the orchard on our property seemed to come straight from the magazine. My expectations were fulfilled and the experience did not disappoint. Thornton W. Burgess, whose daily column in the New York Herald Tribune on the "green world" painted in my mind another idyllic canvas of the natural world, could have been writing about the Westport of that era.