

Locally Grown :

I was out walking on the road the other day. It was a hot one, sticky too. The kind of day we get in July and August around here. You know, the kind of day on which you pretend that the afternoon thunderstorm will break the humidity only to realize that it has gotten even more oppressive than it was before. I imagine life in an aquarium might feel something like this. That's what we are on these water-logged days, tropical fish on terra firma.

And then there are the mosquitoes. I noticed a particularly sinister looking batch of them swarming on a road-rut puddle. There wasn't enough breeze to chase them so swarm they did. We have a certain type of the critter here in Minnesota. It's not that they are larger or hungrier than any other kind of mosquito, it's that they've got attitude. The bugs around here know that the season is short, water is plentiful and blood on the hoof (and foot and claw) abounds. They're smug. Smug bugs. They feel that they are entitled to a free gulp every time they get the notion.

They're tough too. They're not shy, and they're willing to make the ultimate sacrifice for one more meal. The batch that I was inspecting was no exception. As a matter of fact, when I looked more closely, I realized they were sharing a bottle. You know, the way a bunch of low-lives on a New York street corner might pass around the Thunderbird. The tiny bottle was clearly marked "Deep Woods Off". Now that's a tough mosquito! There may be a species somewhere, maybe out east or on the left coast, which actually pays attention to the insect repellents' claims. But not here. For our breed of bug Deet is just the hair of the dog.

So the lead skeeter looks me straight in the eye and says, "What are you lookin' at? Never seen 'Off' before?" There are times when you assess the situation and make a stand. You prepare for battle and charge the breach, come what may. There are other times when your cool analysis of the situation clearly says, "RUN AWAY". This was, I assure you, one of the latter. To walk alone into a battalion of the enemy, each of whom was prepared to die for one more taste, seemed utter folly. The knowledge that there were trillions more where these came from only supported my position. So retreat I did, taking comfort in the fact that this particular crew would live only for another week or two.

Of course they, on the other hand, were secure in the knowledge that, long after Homo Sapiens has left the planet, mosquitoes will be biting whatever comes next. Always have, always will. Now that I think about it, this faith in their own continuing future, must contribute heavily to the attitude that I alluded to earlier. Smug.

This brings me to one of the reasons why I love birds as much as I do. I can watch birds for hours, watch them soar and flutter, feed and drink, bathe and scuffle. I have the compelling feeling that we are on the same side. I feel this way because my friends, the birds, eat mosquitoes every day, all day. The noble Phoebe is tops on the list. To watch her sit patiently at the end of the thinnest twig, bouncing and balancing, waiting for the next tasty morsel to pass, is beautiful indeed. When she launches, catches and consumes, I scratch one more notch on a cosmic scorecard. A smile lightens my gaze and I eagerly anticipate her next stalk, snatch and swallow. Ah, Noble Phoebe. It is reported that she will devour hundreds of the little buggers every day. I wonder if it could be worked out that we could all carry a personal Phoebe or two with us as opposed to slathering ourselves with those foul chemical potions which are hit and miss at best. Think of the bond we would create. Us and the birds, the birds and us.

In the meantime, I'll just keep pretending that wearing lighter colored clothes is a deterrent. I'll go on deluding myself that our \$300 MK 2000 mosquito trap is money well spent. I'll keep pouring on the bug juice and avoiding breezeless dawns and sunsets. I'll do what we do every summer; cower in fear of a tiny, weightless speck of a bug, our own brand of Diptera: Culcidae, locally grown.