

Redpolled:

I've been Redpolled, no doubt about it, I've been Redpolled. No, I'm not referring to a survey taken by the Socialist Workers Party. I'm not talking about certain bizarre practices pursued by deranged Dutch soccer fans. I'm not talking about being de-horsed by the mighty Red Knight. I'm referring to being smitten with a tiny bird which has shown up by the hundreds this late winter in our woods and on our feeders.

A Redpoll is a little smaller than the average goldfinch and predominantly buff, brown and mottled white in color. What sets him apart is a lovely red patch, almost covering the top of his head. He also has red vertical streaking on his breast ranging from barely visible to downright flashy.

They are extremely busy, quite aggressive and almost fearless. I've noticed over the past couple of weeks that when I fill the feeders they kind of just stand around waiting for me to finish. All the other birds will have long since headed for the brush piles and trees. Just so you know, Redpolls are big fans of niger seed, thistle.

They like their weather cold. They like it really cold. I guess that's why they hang out with Juncos. Apparently they are on their way back to northern Canada to breed. This year they came way south of their usual haunts in what is called an irruptive migration. That's a migration that happens irregularly and carries the flocks way off their beaten path. I believe they have decided that our property is the perfect one for filling up, putting on some fat, reading their maps and kicking back before their big push north. I am flattered to be chosen as a way station. We are lucky.

About a week ago I decided to try hanging out with them. What I mean is that I wanted to stand in the middle of the feeders, hands full of seed, and see if they would treat me as just another chow station. The assumption was that their usual habitat, above the Arctic Circle, gives them little to fear from humans. I got my answer in about ten minutes.

The scouts flew by first circling my head and lighting on nearby branches. Then two or three more circled and landed on a feeder that was only a few inches from my shoulder.

When I looked down I was surprised to be completely surrounded by redpolls gleaning fallen seed on the ground around my boots. In another minute the boldest of the pack hopped from the feeder into my open, seed filled palm, and began to dine. Every once in a while she looked back at me just to be sure that I was not a cleverly disguised orange tabby. And then the dam broke.

Dozens and dozens of tiny, noisy, flappy, happy critters were buzzing me, landing on my shoulders, hat and hands. It had happened. What I always wanted had happened. I was in the middle of a Disney movie. The birds, my new best buddies, were as happy as can be with their giant new human feeder. I swear I heard one say to another, "Where'd we get this? Let's poop on it." And so they did.

It is an entirely different experience here in the country, being pooped on. It comes with the privilege of being close to nature, whether that nature is underfoot or overhead. In the big cities of my former life it was pigeons, huge birds by comparison, who would relieve themselves on passing pedestrians. There were viaducts and overhangs in Chicago that one simply did not transgress unless outfitted in a raincoat and floppy hat. I had a colleague in the toy business who would walk blocks out of her way to avoid a particularly busy underpass near our office in Bucktown. She did not own a floppy hat and had been "traumatized" in that location shortly before an important presentation to Mattel. Rough morning.

It has always been true that interactions between humans and less domesticated animals are partially defined by where the interaction takes place. I have found that the more civilized the setting the less satisfying the meeting. A walk in the woods offers a completely different experience to the hiker than a trip to the petting zoo does to his urban counterpart. I am fortunate indeed to be able to compare the two experiences. Most of us go through life knowing only the world into which we were born.

I have recently introduced friends to the pleasures of feeding the Redpolls, that is, being the feeder. The reaction has been universally positive, actually way past positive and bordering on mesmerizing. Now that I think about it, I would say that fifty percent of the experience was their proximity to these marvelous little birds.

But equally unusual might be the experience, for modern humans, of standing completely still for ten minutes and shutting up. Quiet contemplation and heightened focus on one's immediate surroundings can do wonders for one's disposition.

I highly recommend that, at your earliest convenience, you go out and get yourself Redpolled.