

Wyoming Tribune Eagle of September 15, 2016: "Taking in the sights, sounds of local birds." Casper Star Tribune, September 17: "Birds that grace the Wyoming sky."

When our son Walter was twelve, his dad enrolled the two of them in a birdwatching class. Since we lived inland of California's central coast, with ready access to the Pacific as well as to coastal mountain ranges, the bird enthusiasts studied shore birds as well as mountain fowl. "It was led by a Cal Poly professor; a few years later, I was a student in one of his classes," Walter recalls. In his Wyoming career as wildlife veterinarian he loved to observe birds along with creatures from pronghorn to bobcats to badgers to moose.

Many are the instances since that California time that I have benefitted from Walter's expertise. Hence I was looking forward to his first visit at my new locale so I might pick his brains on wildlife sights and sounds hereabouts. Specifically, I hoped he would identify some of my bird neighbors. Then I could read about them in a Peterson Field Guide and get acquainted. Though I used to hike Pole Mountain with the birders of Wednesday Walkers and, not long ago, Casper Mountain during a retreat at Camp Sacajawea, the birds that inhabit the grasslands where I live differ sufficiently from their mountainous cousins that the guides' explanations applied only to what was before us.

"There're these very distinctive birds that like to swoop down and dive," I said when Walter and family arrived from Texas to spend ten days in July. "They fly in groups of three or four and seem at home on the ground, but they're larger than meadowlarks and grasshopper sparrows. They have white stripes under their wings."

Walter could not figure out what species I was describing, but when I pointed them out during an evening walk, he knew right away. "These are nighthawks," he said. "They're not related to hawks but to poor-wills. They often fly with beak open to catch insects, including mosquitos. You're lucky. They're good to have around."

Subsequently someone else said that nighthawks are also known as nightjars. Farmers refer to them as cow suckers or goatsuckers, presumably because they pick insects from the backs of cattle large and small. Another friend spoke of whip-poor-wills and nighthawks in the East, "before all the houses went up in Massachusetts. One time a group of nighthawks, there must have been two dozen or more, flew in a circle that dipped down and then swooped skyward, the circle as big as three houses. Round and round they went. What a sight!"

By late August my nighthawks were no longer nearby. Along with many grassland birds, they were their way south. Lucky for me, the flies disappeared before the birds did: the pesky house flies, the large, annoying horse flies, even the flies that congregated around my compost bin became fodder for the birds. Since the nighthawks weren't here when flies dotted the east side of my house in the spring, warming themselves as the sun came up and leaving their marks on light-colored siding, I assume that the nighthawks Walter and I spotted were en route from Canada, stopping for a few weeks at my place because the pickings were good.

Will they be back when they head north in the spring? I hope so; indeed, I keep my fingers crossed that they'll find the living congenial enough to stick around for the season. They like to nest on the ground, which means they'll find plenty of cover hereabouts.

One bird I was able to identify on my own is the Gray Flycatcher. These birds loved to perch on my tomato cages, where they engaged in their distinctive tail-dipping action while on the lookout for insects. They catch their prey in mid-air.

Another bird had me stumped; specifically, its noises which I could not identify until I pointed them out to Walter. "I can only think of sage grouse," I said. "But grouse perform their courtship sounds only in the spring, so I must be wrong."

Again I got lucky. We heard the distinctive rattle during an evening walk. "Oh, these are sandhill cranes," Walter said. Then he explained that, years ago, when his cows wintered on these fields and he came up one snowy day to feed, "I saw a huge flock of cranes right here. There must have been a hundred of them." He speculated that the cranes back then must have been on their migrating route north. They may have remembered the wheat grain, spilled during harvest, from their migration to the south.

"There they are now," Walter shouted as a small flock of cranes came flying overhead, possibly the remnant of that long-ago large congregation. I'm hoping that the cranes, like the nighthawks, will visit again in the spring; if so, this time I'll recognize them without having to have a guide to name them.