

In My Backyard: Nature's dive-bomber

By C. W. (Bill) Smith

When I was a kid in Marathon I walked to school almost every day, except on those rare days when my mother browbeat my brother into giving me a ride. On the days I walked I could follow the street, east three blocks and north two blocks, to the brick schoolhouse, which in those days housed all grades.

But I almost never took that route because the John Mosses had a big bad dog that would chase me up the hill if it caught sight of me. I usually cut through the fields and vacant lots on a well-worn trail behind the Catholic Church, which eventually brought me to the street by Dr. Worthington's old vacant house and Mrs. Arnold's posh place, close to the school.

But in the springtime even that wasn't a safe route because of nature's dive bomber, the mockingbird. There was a huge Spanish dagger right in the path and invariably a mockingbird would take up residence to raise her young. As any resident of the southwest knows, you don't even come close to a mockingbird nest when the young have hatched because Mrs. Mockingbird is a fiercely protective mother. Your size is the least of her concerns and she will deal you misery if you come too close. It is a common sight to see mockingbirds attack buzzards, hawks, and other large birds who venture into their territory. And cats are fair game, as witnessed by our poor old cat, Charlie, here in Sanderson, who often comes in bleeding from multiple stab wounds to the top of the head. My wife has threatened to get him a miniature Darth Vader helmet to protect him when mockingbird babies are in the nest!

But for all their bravado and cantankerousness, the mockingbird is a most interesting character. Named for their uncanny ability to mimic other birds, cats, dogs, electric saws, sirens, rusty hinges, car alarms and probably anything else to which they set their minds, their native call is most beautiful and refreshing to hear when you are sitting on the side of the bed in the morning, threatening to fall back in to catch a few more winks. No canary ever had a sweeter voice. But feel sorry for the lone mockingbird calling in the night. That bird is an unmated male, crying for a lover.

Our little troubadour, officially the Northern Mockingbird, is one of some 30 species of mockingbird found only in the New World, but the only resident mockingbird of the United States. Found from the northern US to the south of Mexico, there are actually two subspecies, both found in Texas, and hardly distinguishable from the other except by experts. Our local birds have slightly shorter tails than the eastern type and vary in other, miniscule details.

Although our mockingbird is gray-colored with prominent white wing patches that flash in the sunlight when airborne, Mexico has a mockingbird that is blue in coloration. Depending on the light, it can be from blue-gray to deep indigo, all due to a prismatic effect of the feather structure.

As mentioned, our mockingbird can be fiercely territorial, especially if eggs or young birds are in the nest. They will attack anything they think is threatening the progeny including one case where a mockingbird attacked its own reflection in the shiny wheel cover of a car. Mockingbirds have been known to injure or even kill themselves in these attacks.

The mockingbird nest is made of twigs and lined with plant fibers or soft man-made materials such as string or cotton. The female lays four or five brown-spotted, bluish-green eggs. She alone incubates the eggs, and after twelve days the young begin to hatch. For the next twelve to fourteen days both parents feed the young until they are ready to leave the nest.

Depending on the location of their territory mockingbirds will feed on insects, small animals and crustaceans. Though they can become pests in an orchard of ripening fruit, their main diet of insects makes them the gardener's friend and not his enemy.

Besides, the mockingbird has been protected by state law since 1927 when the legislature proclaimed it the state bird (as do Arkansas, Florida, Mississippi, and Tennessee.) In today's world we have been so indoctrinated to the protected status of the mockingbird that it is hard to believe that in the old days, according to the *Handbook of Texas*, it was a popular practice to keep mockingbirds caged like canaries, and a practice still done in areas of Mexico. Even harder to believe, they once were the main ingredient of meat pies in certain parts of the state and the South! Just think, Harper Lee's book might have been entitled, "To Eat a Mockingbird!"

But, have no fear...no mockingbirds will be eaten today. What we will do is listen with great enjoyment to Nature's Bocelli, whose voice, no matter where we hear it, can instantly transport us back to Texas, childhood and home.

And what's in your backyard?



Photo: Public Domain