

Paper Mache

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- By Asher Perla



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Birding is the passion that defines me. It is my way of life, my community, and my teacher. There is not a single moment when I am not listening to, looking for, or learning from birds. I even identify them in my sleep! They've given me tenacity, humility, and a capacity for awe that keeps my love of learning strong. But what I really get from birds is hope.

It is easy to despair over the state of the world, especially regarding the looming catastrophes of climate change and the biodiversity crisis. I feel a panicked urgency to do something to stop the destruction of humanity's greatest asset. It feels like a dream in which we are running headlong towards a cliff and nothing I can do or say will stop us; except this time, I can't wake up. Less than a century ago the Central Valley held vibrant communities of Yellow-billed Cuckoos, Bell's Vireos, Purple Martins, and several others which are all completely gone or only present in a fraction of their former range. This pattern is everywhere: climate change and habitat destruction are eviscerating ecosystems globally. 10,000 species go extinct every year. The feelings of dread I feel when contemplating our planet's future are often so grim that the only way I can bear it is by resigning myself to doom. It seems impossible to make any difference against such insurmountable crises, so what's the point of even trying? Why deepen my love of nature and birds, when it will only make it that much harder when they disappear?

But giving up in the face of adversity is the opposite of helpful. Whenever I feel overwhelmed by despair, I must remind myself that not doing anything will only ensure the future I am desperate to avoid. The only thing I can do to keep going is to accept the possibility of the worst and move forward, working towards a less depressing alternative. And the only way I can manage that is by holding tightly to the hope I get from the thing that makes me care to begin with: birds.

Birds are unique in the animal world in their astounding capacity for long-distance movement.

They are not held back by physical barriers in the same way most other life forms are, and that gives them a remarkable ability to respond quickly to most threats they face. Because they can choose to flee an area if they need to, they are the clearest signal that an ecosystem is in danger. They are literally the

canaries in the coal mine. But while they are often a harbinger of bad news, they also bring hope that a new future is possible. Their capacity for taking advantage of opportunities means they are also the first to return when an ecosystem is restored. After volcanic eruptions, hurricanes, fires, or even deforestation have desolated a landscape, birds are usually the first animals to recolonize. They can survive the harshest of conditions, taking advantage of whatever opportunities they find.

Even today, the species that were once common here remain, although in diminished numbers or in different areas. All they need is for us to restore the spaces they need to live in, and they will return. The damage we have incurred is not yet irreversible, so we must act now before it is. Birds are tougher than we give them credit for; that is my light of hope in an otherwise dim world. All is not yet lost. The wild can and will heal itself, if only we give it the chance.

Asher Perla is a birder and high school senior at Marysville Charter Academy for the Arts. Born and raised in the Yuba foothills, he has a deep connection to nature. When he is not birding, mountain biking, or photographing insects, he can be found performing with a variety of theater groups. Asher is also this year's Yuba County Poetry Out Loud Champion and recently competed at the State Final.