



MY LITTLE TOWHEE

February 17, 2012

Today marks the start of the Great Backyard Bird Count, GBBC to the initiated.

My count of course runs every day. When Dr. Benton asked for census information, I was happy to send my bird counts but confess, since then, I've gotten a wee bit lazy about reporting. This is in no way an indication I am seeing less – or counting less. If the birds are there, I'll try to "catch" them. It certainly ranks high among my daily joys.

For all the watching I think I do, it wasn't until 2002 that I spotted and identified my first rufous-sided towhee. I don't know how I could miss it for no other bird sports such a striking black head and back with the startling orange on his sides above a pure white belly. The bird is reported to also have a red iris except in the Southeast. (We don't have to worry about that, do we?) Once seen it will not be mixed up with any other bird around here. The female is similarly marked only with more subtle shades of brown instead of her guy's black.

Now also known as the eastern towhee, its song is easily recognized as "drink your tea" or, if in a hurry, perhaps just "drink your" or even "drink tea." Generally, he's not in such a rush that he can't stretch out his "tea" time to make it closer to "teeeeeee." Perhaps he's already thinking of golf.



Although these birds can be seen occasionally at a feeder, they prefer to pick up what's fallen underneath. In fact, they are well-known for their scratching for feed and seed, small insects perhaps or other tiny invertebrates. I read once that their scratching is so intense that one might think a deer, or at least a large squirrel, was searching for food in the woods only to be surprised to find nothing larger than a little bird furiously digging away.

Most migrate and return when the calendar officially announces that spring is here. (We, of course, know better.) The male arrives first and starts singing at once. Though his song continues as long as he's around to be heard, at the beginning it's a definite hello with a warning to other returning males as each stakes out his territory. When the females show up in early April courtship begins.

Two broods are hatched during the following months in nests generally built on the ground and exceptionally well-camouflaged. The female alone builds the nest of leaves, twigs and bark which she'll then line with grass, hair or pine needles. Dad's apparently wise enough to keep his distance (and his mouth shut) as she works.

Like the goose (and I imagine most birds now that I'm thinking about it) only one egg is laid daily. Mom will not begin to incubate the eggs until the last one has been laid. While she is sitting, Dad's off eating, singing and, yes, he finds a purpose in all this for it's his job to keep intruders away. She takes off to feed about every half hour, often frequenting her same favorite restaurant day after day. The male is permitted to join her there for a little while.

According to Donald and Lillian Stokes, the male may show up at the nest site with food even before the young have hatched, apparently just checking on the progress of the next generation. Once they have hatched, Mom continues to sit while Dad provides the food.

After the first week or so, the youngsters move out though they really can't fly and are fed for about another month. During this period Mom, anticipating that second brood, builds a new nest leaving Dad to feed the kids and defend his territories as it starts all over again.

Written January 4, 2012