

## Journal Entry: A Gray Winter Day at the Grasslands

*December 29, 2022*

In the LBJ National Grasslands on this day, there was the stillness of a “between” time. One calendar year had all but ended, and a new year had not yet drawn its first breath. I was in a moment between years. The withdrawal of daylight and winding down of autumn ended on the winter solstice, and now the heavens turn and the days will start to lengthen. But this late December day showed no forward movement of time.



The trail in unit 29, LBJ National Grasslands

The sky was uniformly gray, muting the warm browns and straw colors of grasses and leaves. I sat on a camp chair on a trail in unit 29, in northern Wise County. At the height of the chair I could look through the thin stalks of little bluestem to the trees beyond. Those grasses were now rusty brown, standing tall above mounds of thin, curled leaves like small fountains of grass pouring from the ground. Beyond the bluestem were blackjack and post oak, either bare branches or holding on to some dry, brown leaves.



I walked past a blackjack oak that held onto some leaves. A small breeze made them flutter and they produced a dry rattle - like a wind chime made of stiff leaves that could not ring but only make a thin clattering. And the sound was very low, barely disturbing the stillness of the place. It was just enough to draw attention to the overall quiet of the place. And that is one of my favorite experiences, out in nature with nothing to mask and overwhelm the natural sounds such as these leaves were making.

The occasional crow called out, and then for a while there seemed to be no sound. But after a while, a group of blue jays began calling back and forth, perhaps taunting or daring or otherwise saying something in no uncertain terms. And then the quiet returned, in that day between the old and new year. It was the peace between the last exhale and the next inhale of the Earth's year, a time to pause and rest.

The LBJ National Grasslands is a good place to experience peace on almost any day throughout the seasons. There are over 20,000 acres of Cross Timbers woodlands and prairies and sometimes it feels like you're the only human walking the nearly 75 miles of trails there, or at least there are frequent opportunities for solitude. There are a few places where rolling grasslands seem to stretch nearly to the horizon, but mostly there are areas of oaks, junipers, and other trees that open into smaller patches of prairie. All those acres are split into numerous units interspersed with private ranchland in northern Wise County and a small patch of Montague County. It is public land, managed by the USDA Forest Service, and can be visited any time with no entry fee. People ride horses or hike on the miles of primitive trails and go birding or pursue other nature study activities. Hunting and fishing are also allowed. Nevertheless, on winter days like this one, you can walk all day and encounter few people.

I followed the trail past a small pond and alongside a deep swale with thickets of low-growing plum trees and sumac. It was a reminder that prairies, even in smaller patches, depend on some grazing and the occasional fire to burn off woody plants. With bison gone, unless fire burns through parts of the place, the grasslands are slowly overtaken by plum, sumac, and then hackberries and oaks.

But this wasn't a day for ruminating on the health of the grasslands. It was a day to feel the soft sand of the trail underfoot and listen to the conversations of those crows and jays. Just walk and listen, and notice all the winter shades of straw, sienna, and red.

Later, I drove to a nearby area, unit 28 on the map. I let myself in through a horse gate and picked my way through the woods and past a few cows. (The Forest Service allows some grazing within its property, which can mimic some of the benefits that grazing bison once provided.) I reached a woodland





opening amid lots of chickadee calls. One flew to an oak sapling about 20 feet in front of me, calling "chick-a-dee-dee-dee." I love seeing and hearing chickadees. Today their little community was very fussy.

Carolina chickadees are little aerial gymnasts, flitting from tree limb to branch, hanging vertically or upside down as they search for insects and their eggs or pupae. Failing that, they will also eat seeds and berries. Together with the related tufted titmouse, they scour the woodlands in mixed flocks that can also include other bird species. I easily recognize these compact little birds with their black caps and bibs, white



faces, and grayish bodies. If they visit a feeder, they will grab a seed and take it to the safety of a nearby perch to hold it and hammer it open with their small beaks. They live in North Texas year-round.

I sat for a while, but I was torn between wanting to explore (this being my first time in this unit) and wanting to soak up more stillness. Exploring won; there is a strong tug to see what's around the next corner or over the next rise. Then maybe I could settle in, sit and be still. But one wonderful thing about LBJ National Grasslands is that there is almost always another bend in the trail and another rise to look over. I have to satisfy enough curiosity and release enough restlessness to stop and sit.

Somewhere behind the clouds the sun was dropping into late afternoon and the sky was darkening. How different this day was from recent sunny days which defied winter. Earlier today, the thermometer showed 66 degrees, objectively fairly warm for winter, and yet the clouds made it feel cool and damp. I felt tiny raindrops, the beginning of a mist, and the temperature was falling.

A person's perspective could shift, their frame of reference darkening a little as the daylight slips away on a cloudy winter day. The darkness of night was nearly here, and the dark branches of oaks seemed more twisted and angular. Remaining alone here could bring welcome discoveries, and a damp





winter night in this spot might be as delightful as summer nights in the grasslands, just different. It's a great possibility and needs to be tested, but tonight wasn't the time to do so.

A few more words in the journal before leaving: "Against the winter-gray sky, the bare oak limbs are stark. Even a little grim. The temperature falls and the rain begins."





## Journal Entry: The Snow Birds

*February 19, 2021*

We become complacent, sometimes, about living in comfort and security, but reminders of our fragility eventually come along. This time, February grabbed us by the throat, wrapping humans and wildlife alike in arctic cold. Wind and blowing snow sucked warmth from living bodies, until survival became a question not just for animals but sometimes for humans, too. The question for every living thing was this: Can I shake off the icy vampire pulling warmth out of me, or will this end my life? The birds around my back yard feeder have to confront this question every winter, at least during a cold front or two. We humans, surrounded by the built world of houses and heaters, usually do not even consider it.

There are states where winter routinely pushes temperatures down to zero degrees, but Texas is not one of them. As this year began, the weather system over the arctic did not play nice, and as a result the swirling bitterly cold air near the north pole wobbled badly and was pushed down into Texas where it should not go. After several days when the high temperatures mostly were in the 20s, Valentine's Day brought snow in north Texas. The next day the temperatures stayed in the teens, and Monday night the low was variously reported as -2 degrees, zero, or perhaps one degree. If we ventured outside, frostbite could come in as little as fifteen minutes, we were told.

The more our world was swallowed up in bitter cold and blowing snow, the more urgently the birds mobbed the feeders. Northern cardinals appeared, with flocks of pine siskins and yellow-rumped warblers. Along the ground and in low tree branches, they were



Pine siskin feeding in the snowstorm





joined by dark-eyed juncos, the “snow birds.” They breed in Alaska and Canada, but migrate southward in winter, and on Valentine’s Day they no doubt wondered if they had migrated far enough.

The wind blew both snow and birds, but the juncos flew where they would, regardless of the wind. The flight skills of pine siskins and warblers allowed them to find a spot on the feeder, correct for a quick change in the wind, and find a perch. Through the snowflakes I watched them reach into the feeder to get seed, look around in quick, vigilant movements as they processed and swallowed the grain, and go in for more. Bird faces are not good at conveying emotion; a rigid bill cannot convey a smile or a grimace, and their little dark eyes seemed expressionless as they fought to get enough food to sustain the little metabolic engines generating heat under those feathers. What was their state of mind? Did those quick movements reflect urgency and anxiety, or just a bird doing what its small body does to get by? A friend described what I was seeing this way: “They have to keep moving in this cold – constantly moving, because if they stop, they die.”



Dark-eyed juncos on the ground



I stood in my kitchen, looking out at this and bringing the full force of my imagination to what I was seeing. What would it be like to be that bird? The bitter cold would be miserable in a tiny body like that, and every decision carries the weight of life and death. One misstep would allow a predator to take you; failing to find enough food would sap your energy, bring hypothermia and then oblivion. What happens at night? What refuge is there for a fragile thing with feathers, other than the crook of a tree branch or a juniper's evergreen bough to slow the wind? The depths of the dark night, when the deepest cold arrives and there is no acrobatic exertion to build heat and no food to fuel it, that seems like the most lonely and desperate time. Thank God for the shelter that I had, the light and heat from the gadgets of the built world that kept me from experiencing such a cruel night.

Was this hypocrisy? How many times have I complained about our over-involvement with our gadgets and our obsession with adding to the built world. If I get an afternoon on the prairie, I am in love with the grasses and do not want to return to the world of highways and towns. Spending the day in the mountains makes me long for a shack tucked away on a meadow on the lower slopes, to live among the trees and the quiet. Should this storm chase me back to my dependence on the heater and running water? The polar vortex was a reminder that I may love wild places but I am poorly adapted to live in them. On a bright spring day or a mild and contemplative autumn evening, I am in heaven. I can cope with summer heat for the most part, and given a good coat, winter days can be fine. Weeks like this one, though, with frostbite waiting outside the door, make me want a good shelter and a working heater.

The rest of Texas wanted a good shelter and a working heater, too. As the weekend progressed the announcements came that Texas' electricity grid was becoming overwhelmed and rolling blackouts would begin. For most people, when the blackouts came, they stayed. Just as record low temperatures and the state's first-ever wind chill warning were on the way, lights were going out in apartments and homes, and heaters went cold. Birds continued to fly from place to place, searching for berries, seeds, and bird feeders, while humans huddled together under blankets. The built world was failing us. Stories emerged of people dying of carbon monoxide poisoning, running cars and camp stoves and anything that might generate some heat. A man who was dependent on bottled oxygen was found dead, forced outside to use a spare bottle in his truck. Some broke up furniture to burn and even added their child's wooden blocks to the flames.

The water stopped flowing at our house on Saturday, in time for us to get out and buy bottled water before freezing rain made travel too dangerous. The water came back on later that day, and we were fortunate that it stayed on, except for an interruption a few days later. Many people were unlucky. The



parts of the built world having to do with water treatment and delivery froze and failed in many places, and so people went without water. And they went without power and heat. We have wrapped ourselves in mechanisms and gadgets that become our life support system. We expect running water, we expect to be protected from extremes of temperature, and the required gadgets run mostly in the background so that we do not think about them. When they fail, not just for one household but for whole communities and regions, it is a crisis.

I stood at our window and watched the birds, waiting for the power to fail. Mindfulness helped bring me back to this moment, in which I was there in a warm house looking at the outside world while drinking a cup of coffee. I tried to stay in the present and not overwhelm my awareness with the possibility that the house could become dark and freezing, with snow-packed streets trapping us. How would we fare? It seemed unlikely we would meet the cold with the same energy and resilience I witnessed in the dark-eyed juncos foraging in the snow. I opened the back door to toss another handful of peanuts out for the blue jays. It was the sort of cold we describe as "biting," for the sharp, painful sensation it brings to our skin. I could stand out there dressed as I was, but for how long before I got that other kind of bite when skin and tissues start to freeze? Meanwhile, word had gotten around to the jays, and they arrived soon after the door was shut. One or two came to the sweetgum tree, carefully assessing the situation and then flying down to pick up a peanut and even try for a second before figuring out that they were too big. Another perched on the deck and dropped down for his prize. As I peeked out the window, he cocked his head to look at me, took his peanut, and was gone. Did his feathers protect him from frostbite, and his activity keep the hypothermia away? A couple of days before, I worried about how the birds would survive the storm; now the birds seemed like role models for how to get through it.

When our son was able to get around on relatively level streets, we had him and some of his friends over to warm up, shower, and have something to eat and drink. It was like celebrating our getting this far through the storm, by offering comfort and playing some Uno or Scrabble. When we get through it, we get through it together. When I watched the birds outside, it was my inability to see this empathy and connection that cast the biggest shadow on what I saw. For us, in our human skin, the sense that others can feel what we are feeling and will stand with us to face whatever comes – that is as crucial as oxygen. Without it, we are lost and wandering in darkness. And so, on some level I could not put into words, my perception was that the snow birds were also lost.

That is the danger of assuming that the social and emotional functioning of animals could only have a human face. When birds connect, it might not look like human connection, and so we may fail to





recognize it. Ravens, crows, and others in the corvid clan (like our blue jays) have complicated social relationships and even recognize some familiar humans. Black vultures care for their young past the point where the youngster has fledged. Chickadees have a syntax to their calls that allows for basic communication among their flock. I am not suggesting that birds have social relationships with the same depth and complexity that we do. I do expect that the birds at my feeder may have social relationships greater than I could discern, and also that those relationships would be different than those of humans. Birds have the brains that they are built to have; their brains do amazing things that our brains cannot, just as they cannot do some things that ours can.

By Thursday the 18<sup>th</sup>, the sun was out for a time and the afternoon high temperature reached the freezing mark. It felt like the storm was beginning to fade, but much damage had been done. A friend posted a photo of an eastern bluebird lying dead in the snow, its efforts to stay alive having failed. In our yard, white-winged doves had gathered under one of the feeders to forage for any seed that had spilled from above. Sometimes they quietly hunkered down in the snow, keeping a low profile against the wind. And one of them stayed too long, not foraging and not reacting when other birds landed nearby. I don't know how long the dove stayed motionless, waiting for the end, maybe trying to hold on, and then willing or not, surrendering its life.

I imagine that there are lonelier deaths. Other birds continued to come and go, including other white-winged doves. I'd like to think that as the world dimmed, the dove noticed familiar faces, and even as the snow and ice drained the life from her body, she wondered if she was just resting among friends, preparing to fly one more time.



White-winged doves