

**“Birds of the Wyoming Sky” published
in Platte County Record Times on August 8, 2017**

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 moose.

Now that he and his family live in Texas, they get away from the southern summers to spend a few days in Wyoming in my new home "on the prairie." Once here, Walter identifies some of the birds that inhabit the grasslands surrounding my house. Afterwards I read about them in a Peterson Field Guide. Though I used to hike Pole Mountain with the birders of Wednesday Walkers, the birds where I live differ from their mountainous cousins.

“There’re these very distinctive birds that like to swoop down and dive,” I said when Walter and family arrived from Texas 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 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 tol me 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!"

Walter and his family are back in Texas now, but the nighthawks are still at work on the flies, which are bad this year. From the pesky house flies to the horse flies to the flies that congregate around my compost bin: all become 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 ones Walter and I spotted were en route from Canada and stop for a few weeks at my place because the pickings are good. Perhaps they'll find the living congenial enough to stick around for the season. Since they like to nest on the ground, they'll find plenty of cover hereabouts.

One bird I was able to identify on my own is the Gray Flycatcher. These birds love to perch on my tomato cages, where they engage in their distinctive tail-dipping action while on the lookout for insects. They catch their prey in mid-air. My neighbor says she has wren visitors, which she loves.

Another bird had me stumped--specifically, its noises which I could not identify.

Again I got lucky. Walter and I 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.