

While in robust and leafy times, the trees did not let on, but in winter's stripped-down state there's no hiding the part they play in watching over the nursery, shielding barely feathered broods and not-yet-furry baby squirrels from wind and sleet and pounding rains. Or even too much sun.

This cold morning, all is still. Every nest is empty, every bird house hollow once again. Where the winter birds cower, where they huddle, close their eyes and doze, I cannot figure out. Somewhere, even at this illuminating hour, they're tucked away in slumber.

It won't be long till the stirrings come, but for now the only sound is the scritch-scratch of brambles and left-behind leaves as they brush against my legs. I make my way among them, along a blue-stone path, past all the shriveled blooms of not-forgotten summer.

The moppy heads of hydrangea, now dried and crisped to brown, are bowed but not surrendered, still clinging, even in the cold. And all that's left of all the roses are persimmon-colored full-to-bursting hips, a final exhortation, punctuation on the winter page.

By the time the Big Dipper fades from the morning sky, that early riser, papa cardinal, ignites the winterscape with his scarlet coat. Soon follows the red-bellied woodpecker, a nuthatch or two, and, not long after, the choristers of dun-robed sparrows, all a-chatter with Christmas morning news.

I take cover back behind a fir tree, where the crowd at the feeder pays no mind. And where in winter storms, I find the flocks, too, take shelter, the only branches left that promise shield and a place to hunker down. For anyone who wants to hide — too often it's the hungry hawk — these piney limbs are plenty thick.

Then I get brazen, and toss a handful of peanuts to the bristle-tailed squirrels. These are mere hors d'oeuvres, of course, for that trough now spills with Dickensian plenty — among the larder, bumpy apples no one wanted, and pumpkins plucked from the after-Thanksgiving discount bin.

It is all my way of making real my unending gratitude, of bowing deep and soulfully to Blessed Mama Earth.

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Paths to discovery

Need a little nature 101? A few offerings that might open your eyes to the wonders out your window. Even if your only swatch of pure fresh air comes from squatting on a fire escape, surely there's a path to sacred ground worth exploring.

"Why I Wake Early: New Poems by Mary Oliver" (Beacon Press): This 2004 volume by Oliver, winner of the Pulitzer Prize for poetry and the National Book Award, might be one to tuck in your satchel, whether you head to the woods, or are simply bumping along on a train ride into or out of the city. Oliver will have you seeing the world anew, most especially the natural world, the one on which she's so keenly focused.

Peterson Field Guides (petersononline.com): The go-to guides for just about anything you want to know about the birds in your neck of the woods, or a host of other natural wonders, from edible wild plants to the constellations blinking in the night sky. Roger Tory Peterson (1908-1996), the artist, writer and photographer who launched this series has been called "the guide who turned the skies into a cathedral for worship of living things." Not a bad fellow to point the way.

Patuxent Wildlife Research Center (www.pwrc.usgs.gov/birds): The Bird Identification InfoCenter (there's a link on the site) is a fantastic resource on its own. A plethora of other fascinating topics from Patuxent, the nation's first wildlife experiment station, in eastern Maryland, spans bees to whooping cranes. Find breeding bird survey results as well as migratory bird data.

Cornell Lab of Ornithology (birds.cornell.edu): The Cornell Lab is home to the largest collection of bird songs in the world. See results of "Citizen Science" programs like Project FeederWatch, the Great Backyard Bird Count, the House Finch Disease Survey and Project PigeonWatch. It's bird heaven.

BirdSource (birdsource.org): BirdSource is a national database of bird sighting information. It is a joint venture of the Cornell Lab of Ornithology and the National Audubon Society. For a fascinating snapshot of shifts in bird populations over the past century, check out the results of the Christmas Bird Counts for more than 100 years. BirdSource, we are told, "is the future of birding. In a few years we will all be uploading our daily sightings to this site to create a picture of bird distribution across North America. Today North America ... tomorrow the World?"

Sky & Telescope (skyandtelescope.com/observing/ataglance): Just in case you decide to hop out of bed early enough to catch the sky show, this wonderful site spells out what you're looking at, one week at a time. With words and maps, it's practically like having your own Explorer Scout take you by the hand.

— B.M.



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