

## ON CRANES AND SMALLER BIRDS... DON RICARDO'S REPORT FROM THE HIGH RHINE... OCTOBER 2016

I heard their wild, stuttering cries before I saw them, and for an instant I thought I was back on the West End of Galveston Island, where the Sandhill cranes come to winter. Looking up from the balcony, they were just visible, headed downstream in V-formation, the first cranes I'd ever seen in Europe. It was gathering dark and I called to Edith, "Quick, come look!"

The Rhine runs east to west here. Making a search, I found the European cranes' fall migration route is southwest from breeding grounds in Scandinavia and Siberia to wintering areas in France and Spain. Everywhere regarded as symbols of peace, happiness, and long life, cranes are ancient birds. They may have taught man to dance. They nested in Western Europe and the U.K. until disappearing between two and four-hundred years ago. It comes as welcome news that a few breeding populations appear to be making a modest comeback.

The Sandhill cranes came to the West End in December and stayed until March. They can still be seen in the remaining pastureland, though development leaves them with less space every year. We had a family place on Jamaica Beach for a time. I've mentioned before that my mother was a Jungian, aware and sensitive to symbols. She named our house the Cranes' Nest. Just to bring the story around, Sergio Webb, a frequent visitor there, recorded a lovely instrumental piece by that name that appears on his CD, *The Long Green Hour*.

Elsewhere—and it could be nearly anywhere on this beleaguered planet—the birds are not faring so well. Aside from climate change and habitat destruction, there are people in Italy, Egypt, Syria, and on the Mediterranean island of Malta, who put out nets to catch migrating songbirds. In Cyprus people smear tree branches with glue, a practice that was going on in Dante's time. Estimated fatality: 25 million songbirds, little bits of fluff with hardly an ounce of meat on them. Cats also kill millions of birds. Up from previous estimates, domestic house cats kill up to a billion birds a year in the US alone. A better case might be made for the cats—who are at least killing out of instinct—than the humans. We should bear in mind that humans are responsible for the cats. And that neither the cats nor the men are killing these birds out of actual hunger.

The skies seem empty now that the swallows have left. Sparrows come to my feeder by the office. I give them breadcrumbs. They would rather have sunflower seeds. Wouldn't we all? Occasionally we get chickadees and finches, but not many come anymore. We are three stories up from the top of the old city wall, so it could be we are above their normal flight paths. Or perhaps they have all been eaten.

An inventory of common birds around here would include crows and magpies, mallard ducks, and two kinds of hawks—kites, with a forked tail, and those without. I've seen one European kingfisher, called an *Eisvogel*, a striking, iridescent emerald green. You will find more bird life along the Rhine: Swans, herons, diving ducks, and coots. Around town we have *Amseln*, the European blackbird, a glorious singer in the spring. (You may spot an old coot on a bicycle; rare and endangered, and probably inedible).

Amongst the four-legged critters, there are stable populations of deer and wild hogs. Fox, some beaver, and occasional red squirrels. We have hedgehogs. I understand there were rabbits here, up to twenty years ago, but I've only seen two in my time—and both of those on the other side of the Rhine.

"I am glad I will not be young in a future without wilderness." So wrote Aldo Leopold a little less than century ago. Forester, naturalist, and one of the first ecologists, his book, *A Sand County Almanac*, is credited as a major influence in changing attitudes toward our natural environment. When I was young there were still a few unexplored (read unexploited) parts of the planet. I got to witness some of it. I have heard the wild geese and the cranes. As I write, Edith's grandkids are here for the day. Aged six and eight, Raphael and Simon will never see wilderness; but if they're lucky, they may yet be able to see and hear wild cranes overhead.

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The clock is ticking down to departure time: I'm looking forward to touching down in Texas. First gig is a song-swap with W.C. Jameson at Poodies Roadhouse, Spicewood on the 24<sup>th</sup>. On the 27<sup>th</sup> I'll be in Kerrville on the Schreiner University campus with Dr. Kathleen Hudson's classes, and playing the Fuel Coffeehouse in Llano with W.C. Jameson that evening. On the 30<sup>th</sup> I'll be playing a few Guy Clark songs at Cactus Music in Houston for Tamara Saviano's book signing and reading from her biography *Without Getting Killed or Caught*. On November 4<sup>th</sup> I'll be on the Rice campus in Houston doing an interview with Archivist Librarian, Norie Guthrie, and an afternoon class with Dr. Andrew Kline. I plan to look around the Texas Book Fair in Austin on the 6<sup>th</sup>. This will leave me with plenty of time for less academic pursuits like picking and grinning, and hanging out.

Again, I would urge everyone to vote on Election Day. I am a registered voter in Bastrop County and I pay US taxes. I suppose I could have done it my mail, but it feels right to vote in person, and I plan to be there as well. Best to all, hope to see you down the trail. Peace,

Ricardo

Richard J. Dobson

Diessenhofen am Rhein, 14 October 2016

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