

Bob the Bird in Sac Town

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In 1999 I was in Sacramento, sitting on a park bench, when a little bird I called Bob jumped onto my arm. Bob seemed to want to share his thoughts, so a series of articles for the Benicia Herald resulted, which was important at the time since the Kansas school board was siding with creationism over evolution. Birds, you see, are related to dinosaurs, so Bob was upset. Since it's almost summer, though the weather is decidedly chilly, and since a small flock of Republican candidates recently raised their hands, like wings waving in an ignorant wind, to declare their doubts about evolution, and since one of those candidates was Sam Brownback, senior United States senator from the scientifically challenged state of Kansas, I thought it was time to bring Bob the Bird back for a chat.



On a sweltering afternoon in summer I went with my wife to Sacramento where she had some business to attend to at the Capitol. After we ate lunch in the cafeteria, I went outside to wait among the magnificent trees in the park that surrounds the Capitol. I searched carefully for shade and sat down on a white bench and began to work. I lost track of time when a quick movement and rustle at the end of the bench caused me to turn and stare at a small brown and orange bird that had jumped up on the bench near me.

Since I had no food in my backpack, nothing to draw him closer, we warily eyeballed each other for a few minutes, and then I went back to work.

After a few additional minutes, certainly less time than one

would think appropriate to form an intimate friendship with a stranger, the bird moved closer and -- amazingly -- jumped onto my arm.

I stared at the bird, whom I named Bob, in stunned, bug-eyed silence, fearing even my breathing would cause him to fly off. And thinking that no one would ever believe that a bird had been so friendly, I carefully pulled my camera from my bag with my left hand and took Bob's picture as evidence.

As much as I liked Bob's silent company, I discovered that man-bird ogling becomes tiresome rather quickly. I tried talking to Bob, but like dogs and cats, Bob didn't speak English. He cocked his head right and left but said nothing. When my right arm became numb, I moved it slightly up and down, and then moved it higher still, but Bob indifferently sat and watched.

If petting caused him to fly off, I decided, then so be it. I carefully reached out to stroke Bob's breast, but instead of rejecting me, he seemed to like it. He stood taller on my arm and tightly closed his eyes before shrinking back down and going to sleep. Endearing? Perhaps. But I was stuck stroking the breast of a bird who wasn't even paying attention, and I needed to work.

I asked Bob what he wanted to do -- he looked at me disdainfully and went back to sleep. Since I couldn't write with him on my arm, I decided to shake Bob back onto the bench, but he wouldn't go. I tried pushing him off, but he clung tenaciously. Then I quickly pulled my arm away, and plunk he went on to the white wood slats.

I went back to work, but, as you can imagine, I felt guilty.

Bob looked up at me waiting patiently, but I was getting absolutely nothing done. I began to feel sorry for Bob thinking he might be injured, in which case I would be the last person who ever felt anything for him.

That is, until I thought of my wife.

She would find me sitting on the bench with Bob. She would coo

and fret and want to help Bob. She would want us, in body-drenching heat, to take Bob to the Humane Society or to that Walnut Creek museum crazy for wounded creatures. I would find myself driving for hours around Sacramento or to some traffic-inaccessible destination as we tried to save Bob and threatened the future of our marriage.

I panicked. I needed to act quickly.

“Bob,” I said, “injured or not, we must get you to a tree.”

I tried to get him back on my arm, but he seemed to have difficulty even sitting on the bench.

Oh, poor Bob, I thought as I considered grabbing him and running for the nearest tree where I would throw him into the branches hoping for the best. I placed my left hand off the end of the bench, below the seat, and gave Bob a push. Plop -- he landed on my arm seemingly hanging on for dear life.

Did he know my intentions? Was he exhausted and near death? My heart went out to him again, but again I thought of my wife, the heat, the traffic.


I searched for a tree with low limbs where I might be able to throw him with less of a windup -- my sons know I can throw a heater when necessary -- and saw a small, distant evergreen, full and small, where I wouldn't have to throw him at all.

Standing up with Bob on my arm, I walked rapidly toward the tree when suddenly -- I gasped -- he just flew away from me fluttering low and fast.

He wasn't injured at all. That little faker!

But I'm sure I heard him say, as he fled from me, “A bientôt ami!” -- See you soon friend!

I must have been mistaken.



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columns at QCounty.com.