

Off-Season at the Whispering Pines Diner

When I moved to Marlboro, I knew that my wildlife diner would have a different clientele than the one I operated in Dummerston. Sure enough, this land of conifers and cold is the undisputed domain of the red squirrel, with chickadees, nuthatches, jays, and grosbeaks contributing to the local color. Though I don't see the shrews, their tiny tunnels show that they, too, are frequent patrons.

I wish I could say I know the regulars at the Whispering Pines. I've been working to recognize the different squirrels. I now notice variations in color and markings, fuzziness of ears, carriage of tail, personality quirks and facial profiles. Still, there are only a few I can greet with, "And will you have the usual today?" Even if I manage to master the squirrels, there will still be hordes of avian look-alikes. I see why a good diner waitress calls everyone "dear." I find, however, that if I make the rounds of the tables offering cheerful flattery, the birds don't mind what I call them, but continue chatting and eating.

In the winter, once the summer visitors head south, greasy spoons often become the hub of life for many year-round residents. One of my customers has made me especially aware of the social value of diners — a hermit thrush that dropped in one very cold day in mid-December. Hermit thrushes, Vermont's state bird, are esteemed by birdsong connoisseurs worldwide. The rusty coloring on their tails distinguishes them from the wood thrush. A hermit thrush draws attention to this appendage by flick-

ing it upward and then lowering it slowly. In the winter, most hermit thrushes have the good sense to fly someplace warm. What was this bird doing in Marlboro?

While chickadees hopped about energetically, the thrush shivered and always kept one leg tucked into her belly feathers. I suspect the activity of the other birds drew her to the buffet, but she looked baffled by the offerings. She would cock her head and stare, and finally scurry to peck at a bug-like spot. I watched her through binoculars, but couldn't tell if she had selected something nourishing, or just a fragment of sunflower shell. The cold day gave way to a much colder night, and I thought this hermit thrush would be eliminated from the gene pool. When she returned the next day I was surprised, but not optimistic. When she returned for a fourth day, and wasn't shivering, I began earnestly scheming about ways to make the menu appeal to a thrush.

I knew thrushes ate insects, and from her concentration I imagined that she waited for something to wriggle. The first menu offering I tried was suet chopped into bug-sized pieces. I watched, but she didn't seem to choose these morsels. I sprinkled them with thistle seeds to make them look more like insects. She still seemed puzzled.

When the weather warmed enough to get snow fleas and other winter insects moving, the thrush disappeared. On cold days she'd be back at the Whispering Pines, where the waitress called her "such a pretty bird." As she began spending longer hours at the diner, I became concerned that she was filling up on specks of cellulose, though her survival suggested she was getting nourishment.

One of the people I call when I have bird questions suggested the diner menu include berries. I stocked up on currants, dried cranberries and apricots. I spiked them on the buds of the trees she perched on and scattered them in the places she foraged. She wasn't impressed. I chopped them into little pieces and sprinkled them with thistle seeds. I never saw her eat any. Finally I tied a thread to a sprinkled currant and ran the thread through the window into the house. I waited for the thrush to hop within range so I could make



the “bug” wiggle. She ate at other tables that day.

While I watched I noticed that she (finally) seemed to be making deliberate selections-- light-colored items that had some substance. I inspected some of the chaff she hunted through. While sunflower shells made up the bulk of it, I did manage to find a few seeds and seed fragments mixed in. I decided to change the whole diner menu.

No more confusing shells, I'd feed just sunflower seed hearts, with bits of suet and thistle seeds for good measure. I also found a one-quart tub of dehydrated mealworms that looked tasty. The diners approved. The next day everyone licked their plates clean. Now, at the end of January, the hermit thrush looks like a competent winter resident with good feeder skills.

Last weekend, I noticed that the diner was empty. When I went outside I heard the avian patrons gathered in the treetops savoring mid-day sunshine. What noise! Grosbeaks chirped and preened. Nuthatches hopped up and down the trunks, their talk sounding like the horns of sports cars. Chickadees added their chatter to the din. These birds were not mobbing a predator, their sounds and activities were relaxed. It seemed to me like an inter-species celebration; with days growing longer and food in their bellies, everyone had moved out to “the street” to share their exuberance. Up on a branch in the thick of it I could see a tail flick up and descend. Sure enough, there was the musical call note of the lone hermit thrush — lone but not lonely — part of the babble of the locals.