

WHIPPOORWILL

FEBRUARY, 2004

E-COMMENT

#6



FEBRUARY

INDIANS in Kentucky called February *the month of hunger*. I am always glad to see February disappear into the mists of time. It is a month of hunger of the soul for me, restricted in my movements because of winter weather, most of which is sunless — overcast and somewhat depressing. It is a good time to go to the basement print shop and set those gathered manuscripts in type and tie pages up in galleys. At this time of the year my mind and body cries out for sunshine. The pineal gland protruding as it does from my mid-brain, is stimulated by my optic nerves, setting up my annual cycle of physiology. This February the weather here in the Midwest has been mild — no major snow or ice storms, and temperatures have not been below zero even for a short time. That happened in January. But the Earth is cycling through its orbit, getting farther and farther away from the sun, and the northern hemisphere is again tilting toward the sun, and the photoperiod is increasing and each week and it grows perceptively warmer.

The first signs of spring here, other than the explosion of crocus and swelling buds of forsythia, is the appearance of the red-winged blackbirds (*Agelaius phoeniceus*). The males usually begin to appear shortly after the third week of February, often arriving in the Bluegrass region while there is ice and heavy snow on the ground. But *they know* where the sun is and that they are supposed to return to their summer home. The males arrive usually a full month ahead of the females, and one sees them sitting on fence posts alongside the highways, or in trees, or around ponds. They immediately claim a territory and begin singing loudly and posturing aggressively to other males. They say, *“keep the hell out of my territory. I can beat you!* This is a frantically vital and serious business because if a

male cannot successfully defend a territory, an area in which he will mate and help his female build a nest and feed and raise their young, then he doesn't get to breed, and his genes are not passed on to offspring.

The red-wings are late this year. I usually hear them calling before I see them displaying. They have a raucous *Oak-a-leaf!* call that is distinctive. Many of them bring with them a southern accent which they picked up on their wintering grounds near the Gulf of Mexico in the southern United States. But when they appear, I know that spring is on the way. They have more faith in the position of the sun than I have because snow and ice do not daunt them if it is on the ground when they arrive. The females don't arrive for another month after the males, and pairing occurs only **if** the males have established a territory. Often the redwings appear in central Illinois earlier than they do in Kentucky, but it is apparent that they follow the Mississippi and Illinois Rivers more than scarce physiographic landmarks leading to the limestone plain that comprises the Bluegrass region of Kentucky.

I invite my friends to raise a glass of bubbly to celebrate with me this rite of spring — the return of the red-winged blackbirds. Other blackbirds soon appear afterwards — the bronzed grackles, cowbirds, Brewer's blackbirds, and rusty blackbirds. The red-wings always lead the migration here.

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The typeface for this issue is Optima, which I believe is the finest of all the san serif types extant. It was designed by Hermann Zapf. I was privileged to meet him during a three-day seminar held some years ago at the University of Kentucky King Library. The terms *Gentleman and Scholar* certainly fits him, one of the most consummate artists I have ever met, and a kind and gentle man. I believe he is still employed by Hallmark, in St. Louis.

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