

In My Yard

It was early June, and I had just gotten out of school. My summer was off to an easy start, and I was enjoying the chance to sleep in. Each morning I would get up, eat breakfast, and head to my front yard where I would sit and bask in the morning sunlight. One morning something caught my eye: a bright flash of yellow and a jarring screech! I jumped to my feet and noticed a rustling bush ahead of me. Unsure what I would find, I moved quietly towards it, crouched down and peered through a wall of leaves. What I saw made me grin with excitement. A large bird with yellow feathers the color of spring lemons, was gathering twigs one by one, caressing them in its glossy beak.

I sat there in amazement for only a few minutes, when a shrill cry from behind caused me to lurch, startling the bird out of the bush. I felt a swell of remorse as I watched it fly away. Would it ever return? And what was that noise? Perhaps a car skidding by, I thought. I began heading back to my house, when I heard that same scream-like noise, this time directly above me. I looked up, and to my delight, it was another bird sitting on the branch of our sycamore. It looked identical to the first bird; however, this one had a light green tint on its wings. I stood statue still, hoping not to scare it. The bird stuck its beak up towards the sky and produced a series of chirps. At this moment, the first bird flew over and perched beside the second. I was filled with relief. The first bird had returned, and in its beak were half a dozen twigs. The two birds flew downward, side by side, and into a small banana tree near the edge of our yard.

That afternoon, I flipped through the pages of my book, "Birds of North America." I learned that the birds in my yard were called Hooded Orioles, and in summer, they build elaborate nests to raise their offspring. Over the next few days, I would wake early to watch the orioles gather twigs, which they would weave together between the glossy green banana

leaves. After a week, a small gray-brown sack hanging amongst the leaves began to take shape, and I was amazed to see it grow in size with each passing day.

Nearly two weeks later, one of the birds went missing. I got up that morning as usual, went out to the front yard and spotted the first bird foraging on the ground, but the second was nowhere to be seen. I grew nervous. My bird book mentioned that hawks were a natural predator to Hooded Orioles, and I had seen a few in my neighborhood. I could feel my heart racing. Suddenly, the first bird abruptly flew from the ground with a worm in its mouth. It flew into the nest, and from inside the intricately woven twigs, I heard chirping. The nest! I had forgotten all about it. That was where the second bird was, and the first had been foraging not for himself, but for the second bird— and her three new babies! If I stood on my toes at a certain distance, I could glimpse them in the nest. I spent hours standing there each day, each night going to bed with sore feet, but it was worth it to see the chicks, their bodies bald with tufts of patchy white feathers, practically double in size from day to day. The parents would take shifts, one sitting in the nest while the other gathered food. In time, the babies' rapid growth began to slow, and yellow-green feathers coated their bodies. The parents seemed to collect food less often, though the babies seemed no less hungry. Increasingly, the oriole chicks began to resemble their parents, and I knew the time I had left with them was fleeting. Soon the juveniles would fly from their nest and live freely in the world. This thought filled me with a mix of anticipation and dread. And then came the day. I walked outside and peered into the nest. Two baby birds had already left. The parents seemed unfazed, behaving as they usually did. The remaining baby, the runt, was perched on the edge of the nest, reluctant to fly. It remained in this position for some time, so I decided to head back inside for lunch.

It was 1pm by the time I returned, and as I opened my door, I was greeted with a frazzled shriek. The parent orioles were swooping through the air making alarming noises.

Something was wrong. I checked the nest. The baby wasn't inside, and the parents were flying up and down through the air erratically. Suddenly, they perched and grew quiet. I heard a muffled peep. The parents immediately began creating noises comparable to a howling dog. Then they grew quiet again as the faint peeping returned. I followed the sound to a boxwood bush, peered through the leafy mass and saw the baby bird lying limp. It appeared wet but not from water, from blood. Without thinking, I pulled the little bird out from the bush and rushed it into my house. There were two large gashes below its wing. Something had attacked it. I wrapped it in a towel, placed it in a shoebox and put it in a dark room to rest.

The nearest wildlife rehabilitation center was nearly two hours away. I didn't know if the bird would last that long, but there was no other choice. My family and I drove the bird for what was closer to three hours, and by the time we arrived at the wildlife center, the bird was no longer making noise. Its eyes were closed, but I could still see the slight heave of its feathered chest. I carried it to the front door and someone from the rehab facility took it in without saying much. That was the last time I ever saw the bird.

It was evening by the time we arrived home, and the parent birds were nowhere to be seen. The next day, my neighbor's gardener removed the oriole nest from the banana tree and tossed it in a green bin with the rest of the yard trimmings. And although we had placed many calls to the rehab center for an update on the oriole, no one called us back. Soon the leaves on the sycamores in front of our house turned brittle and fell to the sidewalk. I started school in the Fall, and my life went on as usual. For one year I didn't see any Hooded Orioles. But there's a resilience to nature that can never be underestimated— a "bounce back" that you don't often see coming, subtle as the passing of clouds and in spite of a tragic ending. At the beginning of the next summer, the oriole parents returned. They gathered twigs. They knit their nest. They laid their eggs, three in all... and waited.