

THE WHISTLERS

Instinct is first nature. “Or, nature first,” said Mother.

Muscovy ducks and red-eared slider turtles dominated the Shadow Bend pond. By mid-August activity had slowed to complacent. As I approached, the chorus indicated change. I rounded the curve on the bike path and there, in a medley of duck tunes were at least fifty black-bellied whistlers. They stretched across the water, shore to shore, trumpeting their news. The side-lined muscovies seemed to enjoy the break in their tedious summer routine.

The next day the whistlers were gone . . . except for one pair of adults with about a dozen chicks.

Not good, I thought. It's too late in the season for newborn ducks.

Synchronous seasonal compliance is the way, the natural order of things, the unwritten set of rules meant to be followed without question or compromise. The whistlers ignored what should have been ‘second nature:’ as if the ‘first nature’ is easily understood.

Days later the number of chicks was down to seven. I counted the survivors as the parents corralled their babies at the weedy edge of the water.

The pond has secluded spots, so I did not see the whistler family every day. But the next time they were in view, the chick count was down to five. I also witnessed several turtles waiting just a few feet away from the shore.

Mother Nature can be a cruel judge of foolishness. As an observer of absolutely adorable polk-a-dot whistler chicks scooting through the blades of grass, I rationalized the purpose of natural processes. Academically, I accepted the eminent reality. Emotionally, I wanted to interfere; to change the outcome and chase the red-eared sliders into the brush where they could not maneuver so easily toward their next meal.

“Mother’s creatures. You’re part of the system. Pay attention,” I shouted. No one listened.

Still more days passed until the next time I noticed the whistlers. There were only three chicks left. The August heat and red-eared sliders had all but wiped out the family. The obvious saddened me.

Less than a week later I came upon the pond with anticipation. I hoped for good news, but feared nature’s reality. There was only one baby left. I stopped running to be sure of the count. The single tiny chick stayed in the safety zone between its parents.

“Maybe it will survive,” I said out loud, as if to force the ducks and turtles toward different rules in the hope that the black-bellied whistling ducks could somehow beat Mother Nature’s unforgivable ways. “Let the baby win.”

Today, one month after their blessed event, the parent whistlers stood alone at the water’s edge.

“Nature. First, last and always,” said Mother.