

Whip-Poor-Will

Sherry Sass, 9/20/05

Mary, my mother-in-law, hasn't heard a whip-poor-will in years. We were visiting her in Maryland and I thought I'd heard one make its enthusiastic namesake call. She got a wistful look on her face. "I used to hear them every night in the summer," she said.

Mary throws scraps out at the edge of her yard for the wild critters. But the stale sticky buns she left out two nights ago are still sitting among the weeds. My husband Carl remembers wandering through the woods with his friends, where they dared each other to eat the face-puckering sour wild persimmons that once grew there.

Hearing that particular birdsong, sneaking treats to a mysterious something, the taste of wild persimmons—these are the experiences that can make a childhood, that can evoke "home" in the heart of the most distant wanderer. And every place has its own signature.

But now, there in commuting distance to Baltimore and D.C., the birds are fewer, other wildlife are scarcer, the forests are being chopped into isolated wood lots or disappearing as property values soar and new or expanded houses spring up everywhere.

So "home" to the people just moving in will not have nearly the richness or connection to the land that it once had. Those that remember other times know better what has been lost. But when you lose something you love slowly, it can take on the sheen of inevitability—time moves on, things change.

Only these particular changes are not inevitable. Here in Santa Cruz County, most of us can still feel that we live in a larger, natural world, still full of mystery and wonder. You might glimpse a bobcat or javelina dash across a street, or hear the plaintive scream of a gray hawk near the river. Wind sounds different if you're near the million rattling leaves of a cottonwood tree; rain smells different here than anywhere else, even unlike Tucson. The sight of a rattlesnake may unnerve you, but it might also give you a secret thrill: in some sense, you really do live in the "wild west".

We live where we do for many reasons: family, jobs, lack of other options among them. But everyone develops a grounding in where they live; it's one of the basic things that identify us, like our names or jobs. We enjoy such a bounty here, many may not even recognize how deep and intimately we can still relate to the natural world that we're still a part of, and how much that relationship enriches us, how much that context secures for us a very primal sanity that is sorely lacking in so much of the "developed" world.

Ranchers and farmers generally understand and greatly value this connection—indeed, most are certainly not in agriculture for the money. But sadly, there are fewer of them in every generation, and as land uses change towards residential and commercial development, the process Mary is living through accelerates in our once-rural county.

We do not, however, have to yield our connection with our wild world to have a bigger tax base, more jobs, and more services. Ecological science has ferreted out the most important attributes and places to protect, and the best management practices to keep these attributes and places as wellsprings of life and beauty, even in the midst of growth. We have only to listen, to learn from the experts, and to demand from our politicians that not only is the native non-human part of our home worth something; it is absolutely worth fighting for.