

**On Being a
Farm Wife
(and other
hazards)
Joyce Bupp**

Our visitors begin arriving even before the sun is up.

The first glides in as dawn is nudging away the lingering shadows of night. He takes up his usual position, gathers a deep breath and with unbridled enthusiasm sings praises to the coming day.

Not a rooster. A mockingbird. This bird takes very seriously his responsibility to jumpstart the morning with his raucous wake-up calls. Or maybe he's the alarm for the roosters who do get in on the action soon afterward.

Early mornings and late evenings find the mockingbird dominating the chorus of birdsongs that belies that familiar phrase "quiet countryside." Fact is, our feathered friends are noisy neighbors.

But it's an enjoyable racket.

This mockingbird is a virtual one-man-show by himself (herself?). His repertoire spans the gamut of the songs of assorted other species, plus his own original version of rap music. And he's an unabashed entertainer who demands your attention.

He'll practically land on your head to make sure you're paying him proper attention.

His wake-up calls seem to originate high in the trees of the backyard — just beyond the window screens. Or so it sounds. If I go to the garden, he'll chatter from the overhead electric wires — probably commenting on the weeds that are growing this year like . . . weeds.

When we sit at the fishpond, he

parks in the brushpile of limbs brought down by the spring ice storm. We planned to get rid of that brushpile, but another bird interfered. A Northern (Baltimore) Oriole finds the top of the pile to be a handy spot to pause on ingoing and outgoing flights from a nest somewhere in the maples. At least that's what The Farmer keeps telling me. I've yet to see the elusive black and orange fellow.

And further holding up the brushpile cleanup is the family of baby bunnies that streak in and out from the bottom of the pile of limbs. They claimed the pile as home after outgrowing their birthplace — a fur-lined hole located smack in the middle of the strawberry patch. Recently I had to rescue one of the bunnies when it sneaked back into the patch to snack on berries and became entangled in the bird-deterrent netting.

Another of the mockingbird's favorite haunts is also shared with a fellow backyard resident. The

farm's electric service pole sits just outside the front entrance to the dairy barn. From the very tip-top of that tall pole, just above the transformer, he sits to belt out solos while I feed calves. A squirrel sprawled over the top of the pole one recent morning appeared to have died there. Perfectly still, the squirrel's bushy tail hung limply down to one side; but with the binoculars I could see its eyes were open. I've never seen a squirrel so still. Maybe it was just playing possum, because later, it vanished. Or some hawk had breakfast.

But the mockingbird's most inspiring hangout appears to be what we call the "osprey nest." Some years ago, our son devised this tall pole with a flat nest site on top and erected it on the lower

edge of the big pond. On a rare occasion or two, we have had an osprey visit; more normally, the perch hosts hawks, herons, and kingfishers.

One recent evening, that boisterous mockingbird followed us to the pond, landed on the platform and began to belt out his medley of songs. About every 30 seconds, he'd stop singing, do several acrobatic flips around in the air, then resume singing. This bizarre behaviour went on for several minutes.

There's no way to know for sure.

But I suspect he found some way to sneak under the bird netting and was suffering the effects of one too many overripe strawberries.



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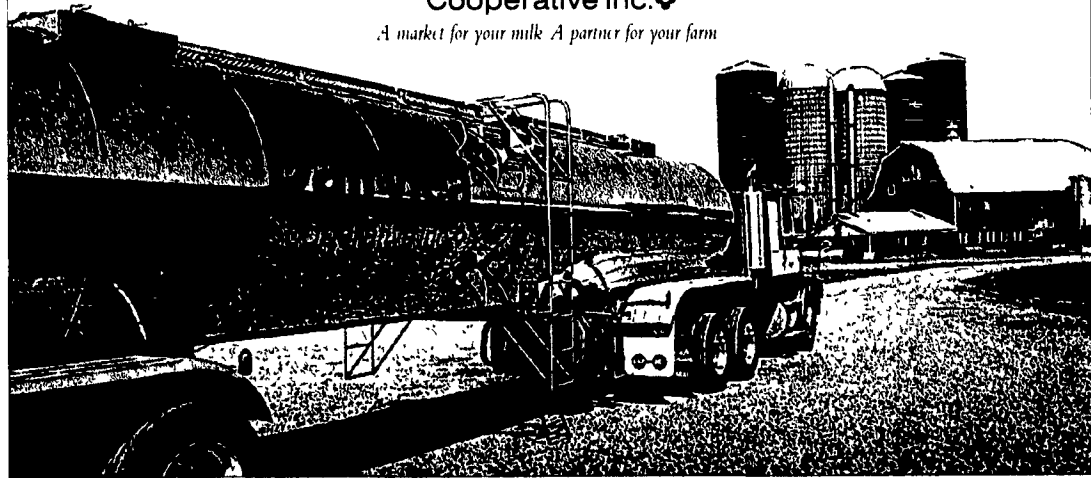
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