

## A Perfect Egret?

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Pure white in the sharp sunlight of early morning, an egret struggles with a fish as big as its head. The bird drops the fat bullhead, pecks at it, picks it up, tosses it into a new hold, drops it again, over and over. A ten minute job - is it trying to pick off sharp spiny whiskers before swallowing?

In the clear air of early autumn the bird's yellow bill and black legs are a stark contrast to feathers whiter than white. A dozen mallards lounging at the other end of the pier, a crowd of swifts chattering over the water, yellow-rump and palm warblers in hawthorns bearing dark red fruit, one, two wood ducks dropping into glassy water from low branches, the first gaudy color in small maples – this is a picture of the drama and the peace of the wild.

Is this perfect vignette playing on a back country lake?

No. Reflected along with the egret's graceful form are cars on the boulevard just beyond the shore. Mowers trim lawns, saws and chippers rumble where a crew disposes of borer killed ash trees on the golf course. From the far side of the park the constant rumble of expressway traffic and the big, rhythmic steam piston-like whoosh from a foundry firmly place us. Wilderness this is not.

I came here this morning for some relief from reading yet another disturbing treatise on our failure to deal with climate crisis. The park does its best as antidote. I didn't burn any fossil fuel to get here, and walking itself always helps.

I could appreciate less urban din, but at least the chipper has gone quiet for the moment. And the dead trees – over 400 already removed from this one park of less than a half mile square – are yet another symptom of our impact. Keeping this oasis a haven requires management: lawns for picnics and fields for ball games, paths for joggers, bikes, walkers with and without dogs, manicured fairways and greens for golfers, and yes small but productive areas for trees and flowers, birds, butterflies and nature nuts. Even the egret's breakfast is a product of management for a very popular recreational fishery.

Management requires fuel. No one mows a golf course by hand. Ecological services come by trucks with power tools. Most park users, birders no exception, drive here.

To care for a place we must know it. Knowing is personal, being there. Want to get to know a national park? Fly and drive! Putting out fire with gasoline?

There is a general disconnect between what we love and the lives we lead. The reading that sent me here today is George Marshall, *Don't Even Think About It*.<sup>\*</sup> A strength of this book, however unsettling, is Marshall's review of how we process information and our ability to place conflicting facts

and values into different compartments, in our heads and in our lives. There are, as the title clearly says, much more disturbing stories about our inability as individuals and society to deal with climate crisis.

Is this morning perfect? Hardly, but as close as I will come today, or in many days. I linger as long as I can, settling my head again for routine chores and other business of living every day. After 200 plus pretty grim pages Marshall does offer a strategy for hope. I will go to my own daily struggle with conscience, and search for a personal ethical place on this earth.

\*Marshall, George, Don't Even Think About It, Why our Brains are Wired to Ignore Climate Change, Bloomsbury, 2014