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# Cain and Abel and Hannibal

*John Friel*



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Winter has stomped through the door, kicked off its boots and settled in for a long stay. Ready or not, welcome or not, the Old Man is in the house.

I like to see how garden centers, horticulture's most visible entities, sustain themselves through the bleak months when gardeners can't garden. A retail plant center, like the plants it sells, enters a sort of dormancy, shedding outermost inventory the way perennials shed leaves. Energy migrates into the core, the root mass, for safekeeping.

I visited a local independent and a national. Both had what I was looking for: Bird seed and feeders. When the flora isn't putting on a show, you can always count on the fauna, if the fauna can count on you.

The indy's inventory was impressive: over three dozen types of feeders in multiple categories. Some were accessible only to specific species, e.g., hummingbirds or finches. Others would accommodate a wide range. Many claimed to be squirrel-proof.

The box store had a third as many. That independent practices what pundits preach: Offer more options. Differentiate yourself. Don't make your customers, or their avian visitors, settle for what they can get elsewhere. I went home with two bags of seed, of which both stores had a good assortment.

I'm seriously infatuated with birds, but not a serious birdwatcher. My life list comprises fewer than 150 species—a competitive birder's good month. The current one-year records: 749 species in America and a staggering 6,042 worldwide.

Dave Barry said, "There's a fine line between 'hobby' and 'mental illness.'" I hesitate to define success as insanity, but those record-holders are walking that line like a tightrope.

I hang some feeders, I watch for birds almost constantly and I traveled to Texas recently specifically to score one extraordinary avian, the 4-ft. sandhill crane, overwintering on Galveston Island. It was literally breathtaking

to see my first one.

That magnificent brute's elegant, graceful stride underlined the comparative gracelessness of our gangly race, leaving me embarrassed to be merely human. I envy how wild creatures adapt to difficult conditions, while Homo sapiens must manipulate conditions to suit our frailties. Some birds stay put year-round, whatever nature dishes out. Others go where the weather suits their clothes, via heroic feats of long-distance flight.

At a glance, besides tasty ones, birds serve no apparent purpose. They're just fun to watch or a nuisance when gathered in inconvenient places and numbers. But they eat insects wholesale so we don't have to swat as many. They devour weed seeds, protecting crops. They eat rodents.

They're not always nice, even to one another. If your feeders succeed, eventually raptors will notice. To harriers, bird food = smaller birds.

The treetops, even the nest, are no Eden. You may have experienced sibling rivalry, but birds? Think Cain, Abel and Hannibal Lecter. Those magnificent cranes hatch two eggs, but raise only one chick, which killed and possibly ate the other. They're descended from dinosaurs and that reptilian heritage is undiluted.

Nonetheless, bird love is deeply ingrained in humans. It drew me thousands of miles to see cranes, who traveled even farther sans tickets. It inspires Americans to spend nearly \$4 billion yearly on seed and accessories. Feeding birds is hobby #2, behind gardening—a natural for garden centers.

Are you cashing in on for-the-birds action? Assess your inventory and upgrade if necessary. Team with local bird-watching clubs for a clinic on what local avians eat and what housing and habitat they need.

Anything that pulls a cynic like me away from the woodstove and through your doors and cash registers is a significant potential profit center. Don't let it migrate past you to overwinter elsewhere. **GP**

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