

A FAIRY-TALE BIRD GARDEN

The yard of my parent's house situated in the picturesque valley of the Revúca stream below the majestic rocky altar of Čierny kameň was the site which I chose for building up my „Fairy Bird Garden“ or „Bird's Paradise“. In terms of modern ecological terminology, we are speaking about an eco-yard. The „Bird's Paradise“, that means six dozens of big naturally grown wooden feeders and two times more bird boxes for roosting and breeding. The „Fairy Bird Garden“ offers a year-long „full service“ – full board and accommodation in top luxury boxes, for the little plumed creatures. The community in the „Bird's Paradise“ consumes 600 kg sunflower seeds yearly.

In winter when the nature's still and hidden corners are lacking sufficient food supply, the „Bird's Paradise“ is visited by hundreds of tiny feathered creatures. From the family of tits – the most frequent lodgers in the roosting and breeding boxes, is the dominant Great tit. Less abundant is the Blue tit and Marsh tit. As the „Bird Garden“ is situated not far from a mixed forest stand, Coal tit and Willow tit are also regular, nevertheless, less frequent customers in the feeders. The rarest member of the large tit family banqueting on sunflower seeds is the Crested tit, a really exceptional visitor to the feeders. The „Punk Lady“ as I have baptized this bird for myself, is a very lively creature, able to stay at one place for one or two seconds only and continually whirling – either flying between the trees or skipping from one branch to other, diligent in hunting for food. As if this beautiful and smart Lady with the conspicuous cople-crowned head-dress did not wish to be admired too much.

An exceptional visitor to the Bird Garden is also the Long-tailed tit. This bird, looking like a plug of cotton wool equipped with a long paper tail, is a sociable creature living in little family flocks, migrating across the winter land and attracting attention through a characteristic „chirring“. The view of the hovering Long-tailed tits is always a pleasure for me, especially in the case when a strong wind is blowing, drifting of the long tails of these birds sideways or sometimes even onwards. Watching the Long-tailed tits hanging on snow-covered twigs belongs again to the category of the „Supernatural“. I can scarcely tear my eyes off such a „seraphic“ picture...

From the large family of finches, the „subscribed“ visitors to the „Bird's Paradise“, Siskins, do not scorn sunflower seeds especially in winter and visit the feeders in large flocks. It is a pleasure to watch these jovial bright green-yellow-black birds feeding on the offered food. This bird is commonly known as a subject of numerous folk songs, saws, and says, there are not many people, however, recognising it in nature. The soft chattering of a small flock of Siskins consisting of several dozens exemplars can induce one into a very congenial mood... The Siskin is one from the little number of plummy animals singing for themselves also in winter days with harsh frosts when the other birds have absolutely no desire to sing. This tiny bird is not very shy, that is why can have a very close look at this beautiful creature.

Equally abundant visitors to the feeders are Goldfinches and Greenfinches. These two bird species like relishing sunflower seeds. From time to time, the supply of sunflower seed also attracts the Bullfinch, the bird with silky red feather on their chest and neck. Watching this feathered feaster at the feeder, I find myself to be almost in the entrance hall of the heavenly paradise. As the Bullfinches live in permanent partnership, they also visit the banquet in pairs – red-chested males accompanying their brown-chested mates.

The sunflower seed is not neglected by the Hawfinch, a feathered handsome being with carved feathers „lace“ in his wings. When this species of birds comes to the banquet, the other banqueting subjects are enforced to move away from the feeder and to wait watching at a secure distance until the dumpy Hawfinch has filled up to the top. The robust beak of this bird is a perfect tool for breaking not only sunflower seeds but also cherry and plum kernels.

Another regular, but less frequent visitor is the Nuthatch. This „arch fellow“, our single feathered animal capable of climbing up on the tree bark with his head downward, carries sunflower seeds in his beak away to his „secrete private“ spots where he break the fixed seeds and gets at the delicacy. The bird seeks appropriate „holders“ in the cracked bark or split wood, fixes and break the seed and takes profit of the tasty pip. Tits crack their seeds sitting on tree branches and holding the seeds in their claws.

Also sparrows, dwindling away from the country over the last years, find in the “Bird’s Paradise” their “réservés” in the feeders. The “Fairy Bird Garden” provides a temporary winter residence for the sparrows from over the whole village, because the Garden is the only site always offering them the table set with abundant food supply.

Another regular visitor to the feeders is the Great woodpecker coming now and then to enrich his menu with sunflower seeds.

The abundant local bird community is several times a day visited by Sparrowhawk, hunting for some inattentive feathered beings. When this foraging bird appears on the horizon, the whole feathered community starts crying in alarm and the small feathered creatures seek every possible hiding place. At the moment of the Sparrowhawks’s arrival, the “Bird Garden” looks as if all the birds were swallowed up by the earth. Neither the weakest sound can be registered; neither the slightest movement can be noticed. The birds maintain motionless in their caches. Only a long time after, when the little beings get quiet and sure that the danger represented by the predator is over, the life in the “Bird’s paradise starts to whirl again at full intensity. The tits bring in their beaks the seeds to the permanent spots where they break the seeds holding them in their claws. Goldfinches, Greenfinches, Siskins and Sparrows quarrel sitting on the feeders and loudly chattering...

During the Christmas, the “Fairy Bird Garden” embraces the largest amount of eminent customers. From the North, in some years arrive Waxwings and Bramblings. The Waxwings with puffed-out silky feathers sitting motionless under crushing frost on snow-covered twigs of apple or rowan – woody plants favoured by this bird, are looking like downy doughnuts... They are genuine feathered Christmas decorations of the trees during the Christmas festival days.

The roosting boxes are sometimes the bones of contention, fought for unmercifully by the tits on evenings. Stronger, dominant individuals usurp the privilege of preferential choice of the best “lodging houses”. Those less vigorous have to make do with a “shelter” somewhere in hollows in the hedge poles or even in the post box... During extremely frosty nights, the bird boxes provide night quarters also for 2-3 Wrens. The sense of over-sleeping in a house surrounded by bird boxes hosting “drowsy” 123 hibernating tits is beyond any description. The system

controlling the tit's body lowers the body temperature by several degrees, which results in damping of all the important physiological functions (heart activity, breathing) and inducing the state of certain lethargy (torpor), in which the bird is less sensitive to the external stimuli. A tit huddled up, and wrapped into the puffed-up feather coat looks like a coloured tennis ball. Those who are not familiar with this natural and remarkable event taking place in its hidden corners can assume that the bird is dead; only the "blowing up" and "blowing down" of the ball manifests that this strange "little thing" is a living creature. Tits in state of hibernation can be manipulated carefully (weighing, measuring) without waking the bird up. The sleeping tit, however, must not be taken in heated flat or house, because the bird would awake and the final result would be more or less certain death. The next morning, the tit rouses from sleep, his body temperature and physiological functions (heart activity, breathing) rise to normal, and the bird leaves the shelter. During a night with very harsh frost – about minus twenty degrees Celsius, tits can lose 2-3 grams of their original weight, which represents up to 15% of the previous evening weight! The consumed energy is converted to heat protecting the bird against freezing over the long, sixteen hour night.

In spring and summer, 2-3 pairs of tits and 3-4 pairs of Starlings maintain breeding in the "Bird's Paradise". Also in this time, both permanent and occasional bird visitors can find here their food. They store this supply in case of longer periods of unfavourable weather. Tits are feeding their young not only with animal food; but this substantial component is also supplemented with sunflower seeds. Certain suitable spots under the house's roof have been occupied by eighteen sparrow pairs already for over several decades – evidently the birds do not have to fly very far in the garden for acquiring food for their offspring...

The fact that the good reputation of the „Bird's Paradise“ below the Veľká Fatra and the Nízke Tatry mountains has reached far beyond the confines of Slovakia is well documented by presence of tits coming from very remote corners of the European continent. The year before last, there was sighted in the „Bird Garden“ a Great tit from Finland, the last year, this place was visited by Blue tit, hatched in Slovenia! These feathered messengers will certainly pass their breeding-fellows the information on the top-quality full service offered in the „Bird's Paradise“ under Čierny Kameň, and the noble guests from the North will be more and more numerous

in the forthcoming years. Would it ever possible for a feathered creature to deny this „full service“, comprising full-pension and comfort accommodation in a five-star bird boxes? Boarding and accommodation in the „Bird’s Paradise“ Liptovské Revúce meets all the top-quality criteria, and without exaggeration we can conclude that the territory of the „Fairy Bird Garden“ has the highest density of bird feeders and bird boxes from all over the world. Perhaps it is a fact worth recording in the Guinness Book.

Building of the “Fairy Bird Garden” required me working for several years. The work was very hard and demanding. Collecting natural-grown wood, shaped as variously as possible, requires being very close familiarity with the forest – and this is only possible with the background of having managed thousands of kilometres on pathways, both easy or very difficult, crossing the forest in close or more remote neighbourhoods of my native village... The following “craftsmanship” with wood working and feeders building represented another high demanding business. However, the final result is worth of the effort – the “Fairy Bird Garden” is a “genuine paradise” not only for the birds but also for people. As a “pars pro toto”, I would like to quote here the following, loudly uttered compliment,: “Sir, may I ask you for permission to stay in this “Fairy Garden” for a moment more... Today I am on my way back to Prague, and I would like, if possible, to keep the fairy atmosphere of this place for myself until the end of my life...”

Since my earliest childhood, I have been longing for nature, especially the feathered beings, and I wanted to equip my yard with bird feeders and boxes for attracting these creatures. I had to wait for materialisation of this childhood dream in to my adulthood. Some winter days, when I enjoy hundreds of birds criss-crossing my “Fairy Bird Garden” and turning it to a sort of “bird hive”, I feel happy as a little boy. The feathered banqueters in the “Bird’s Paradise” are already well familiar with their host and some of them have such confidence that they come to take their sunflower seeds directly from his hand. For any animal species, this is a manifestation of the highest possible confidence... In all conscience, the host of the bird community could never wish a sweeter reward.