
CONTENTS

Preface	ix
Acknowledgements	xi
Prologue	xii
The Beauty Walk	1
Winter: Season of Bleak Beauty	7
Spring: Season of Renewal	17
Summer: Season of Fruitfulness	27
Autumn: Season of Reluctance	39
Webs of Beauty	47
Fleas can be Beautiful	57
Aromas, Beautiful and Otherwise	69
Beauty in Birds Nests	77
Beauty Lost Forever	89
Beauty Regained	95
Beauty in the Bog	105
Bizarre Beauty	113
Beauty Withheld	123
Epilogue: Caring for the World's Beauty . . .	131

Winter:
The Season of Bleak Beauty



The great American pastoral poet Robert Frost was an astute observer of nature, and his poems are filled with lines which demonstrate the two sides of his eccentric genius. In a poem titled “Reluctance,” of which I shall have more to say later, he wrote: “The leaves are all dead on the ground / Save those that the oak is keeping.”

Why is the oak keeping its leaves? And how many of the thousands who see this phenomenon each autumn actually notice it? The falling leaves, such an integral part of the season, result from one of nature’s small but significant adaptations. At the base of each leaf of the maple, the ash, the poplar and most other deciduous trees, a layer of cells slowly dies as the seasons change. The leaf eventually breaks off at this dead layer of tissue, and falls to the ground, meantime providing us with the gorgeous display of color which we in the northeast are privileged to see annually. The oak does not so readily give up its leaves, which remain stub-

*Autumn:
The Season of Reluctance*



In no season of the year is it easier to walk in beauty than in the golden days of autumn. Above us is the beauty of the sky which led poet Helen Hunt Jackson, a century ago, to call it “October’s bright blue weather.” Below us, the ground is carpeted with asters and goldenrods, and around us the scarlet of the sumac, the bright gold and orange of maples, interspersed with the green boughs of conifers as counterpoint, provide a unique beauty almost unparalleled at any other season.

At the same time we are reveling in this feast of beauty, we are well aware of its transitory nature. A poet has written “I have never liked or trusted October, the time when the dying starts.” Soon enough, in our area usually around mid-October, the first hard frost will kill most of the annual plants, and a cold wind out of Canada will rid the deciduous trees of most of their beauty. Their stark

*Aromas, Beautiful
and Otherwise*



The human memory is a strange and wonderful thing. Some scientists believe that everything we have ever learned, every experience we have ever had, remains stored in the brain, but if this is true the mind is very selective in what memories it can bring to the surface. As we grow older, memory becomes even more selective, so that, as one of my friends said recently, “I can remember the words of a silly song I learned when I was four years old, but I can’t remember what I ate for breakfast.” Most of our memories are either visual or auditory, but the odors of the world also play their part. The 2004 Nobel Prize in physiology was awarded to a pair of American scientists who studied how the human brain perceives, remembers and recognizes odors. According to these studies, people can remember and recognize up to 10,000 different odors. I will not attempt to explain the mechanism

Beauty in Bird Nests



New constructions in nature are more remarkable than the complex nests constructed by birds. There are birds, of course, whose nest is just a scraped-out spot on the ground. At least one bird, the fairy tern of the far Pacific, lays its one egg in the crotch of a tree branch and incubates it in this precarious position. Some nests are seemingly random gatherings of twigs and grasses which can hardly be classified as beautiful or complex.

Most of our birds, however, build nests which are marvels of construction. Imagine the skill required for the oriole to weave that long pendulous nest from plant fibers, using only her bill. Imagine the intense dedication required of the male marsh wren who not only builds the nest which the female will use, but also builds several “dummy” nests in the vicinity; or, in the case of the house wren, stuffs every cavity he can find with sticks, not giving up even on such daunting projects as filling a large mailbox.

Like almost any small boy reared in a rural environment, I was always looking for bird nests. My parents were sufficiently conscious of the natural environment to forbid me to collect them until the young had fledged, but I had, at one time, a considerable collection of empty nests: the elegant down-lined nest of the goldfinch; the rather simple horsehair-lined nest of the chipping sparrow; even the tiny lichen-covered nest of a hummingbird which nested in one of the maple trees in our lawn. From the time when, at the age of about five, I turned over a discarded shovel blade and revealed the nest of a small unknown sparrow, bird nests have fascinated me.

Perhaps beauty really is in the eye of the beholder. I have always thought these nests beautiful. Their color is always monochrome, except perhaps in the case of a wood thrush nest which may contain some brightly colored paper. Their shape is pretty predictable, designed to accommodate the mother while incubating, as well as the baby birds until they are fledged. But beauty is more than color and form, and I find the well-constructed nest firmly attached to a limb a beautiful sight.

Some nests are remarkable, though not necessarily beautiful, because of the site chosen, like those of peregrine falcons which have adopted window ledges of tall buildings and the girders of bridges. My first published scientific paper was about an unusual nest. In my in-laws' yard there was a large cottonwood tree, in which Baltimore orioles regularly nested. In 1948, a house wren took over last year's oriole nest, stuffing it with twigs and laying its eggs in the bottom. Since these birds usually nest in cavities or in bird houses, this seemed remarkable, but when you think about it, the baby birds, looking up at a small opening at the top, would find it little different from a tree cavity. It had one major difference: the nest swayed like the proverbial cradle