



# MONTEREY NEWS

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## Chickadee Cheerfulness Verve and Courage

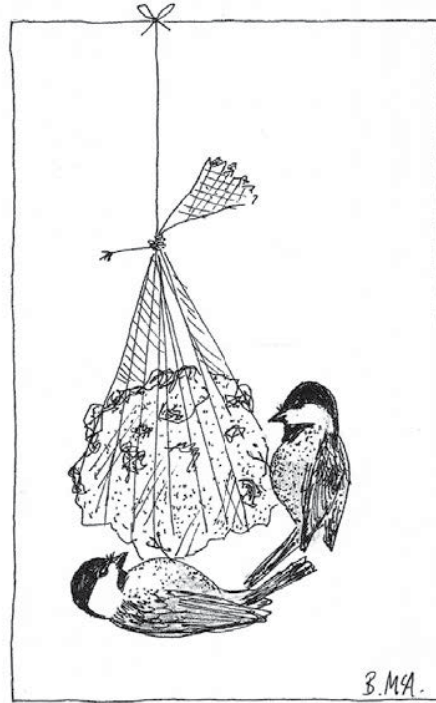
How we folks do love to identify with other creatures, even plants, even rocks. We speak of each other as being steady as a rock, solid as an oak. Mostly we find attributes of human character or appearance that are positive in our minds: sweet as a rose, busy as a beaver. To a rose, there is not so much personal sweetness, I think. There is reproductive success, thanks to the visit of a “busy” bee, and then this trait passes along to the next generations. These days some nature lovers feel constrained not to describe the critters in human terms, not to “anthropomorphize” wildly the wild. You can still hear it now and then, especially in dramatic words of danger, as in the “viciousness” of some animals, ones with teeth and claws and a snarly look, which, on the face of another person, we would interpret as mean or dangerous. Rightly or wrongly—maybe they just needed to sneeze.

When I look into the old books, I enjoy the unfettered innocence of the writers. Edward Howe Forbush, state ornithologist of Massachusetts a hundred years back, was a scientist and observer, full of numbers and observations. He was also good with words and free with attributions. I haven’t yet found *vicious* among them, but of the chickadee he was thrilled, happy, to write that the plumage is “lax and loose,” the species a “bird masterpiece beyond all praise,” a “blithe woodland sprite,” and “the embodiment of cheerfulness, verve, and courage.” What license these poets of the science annals enjoyed, and how we might envy them. Here is Dr. Frank M. Chapman writing in the 1914 *Handbook of Birds of Eastern North America*:

“On several occasions Chickadees have flown down and perched upon my hand. During the few seconds they remained there I became rigid with the emotion of this novel experience. It was a mark of confidence which seemed to initiate me into the ranks of woodland dwellers.”

We are looking for connection, and we always have been. I want to identify with the chickadee, a small body, sparkling and active. If that were me behaving so, I would be full of courage and verve. I would be blithe!

We look out in the orchard and see the blithe spirit working over the rough bark of the trees, ferreting out eggs and larvae of moths and beetles that might one day hatch and gobble up apple leaves, lay eggs in fruit, and send the crop



dropping before it got ripe. These little insect animals are not good guys to us and we do not want to identify with them. I doubt we’d go so far as to call them vicious, but the birds that gobble them down are loyal, trustworthy, and brave. They are beneficial. They are the guys we want on our side, the guys we are, ourselves: white hats, good deeds.

One of those early writers estimated that a single chickadee would eat 138,750 eggs of canker moths in the twenty-five days during which the female moth lays eggs in the orchard. In 1898, Professor E. Dwight Sanderson wrote in the magazine *Auk* that the chickadees of Michigan consume eight billion insects per year.

This kind of math is based upon the slaughter of the blithe spirits, in order to analyze stomach contents. This is science, and research is no respecter of individuals. You could call it collateral damage in pursuit of knowledge, that thing we treasure and which can be applied to our crop yields, after all. Once applied, well, we are in business and here come sin and the profit motive. On this subject, that great lover of wildlife Henry Thoreau wrote:

“There are certain current expressions and blasphemous moods of viewing things, as when we say ‘he is doing a good business,’ more prophane (sic) than cursing and swearing. There is

death and sin in such words. Let not the children hear them.” (*Journal*, April 21, 1841)

It can only do us good to identify with the dapper chickadee, and since identity goes both ways, let’s not worry about any harm coming to the chickadee from our feeling some oneness. We have to be careful not to prophane the sundry creatures of creation by finding them to be “doing a good business,” though. Or if we want to see it that way, we have to understand good business to be productive daily foraging, nesting, chick rearing, and passing along abilities through nature and nurture. Good looks and singing are important, too. That witty intellectual, critic, and essayist Clifton Fadiman once said this: “Thoreau can get more out of ten minutes with a chickadee than most men from a night with Cleopatra.”

I suppose and hope Fadiman meant no disrespect to Cleopatra and to most men. He was wisecracking. The joke, though, is on Fadiman, since odds are he never had the joy of those ten minutes, nor a night with the queen in ancient Egypt. Best he could get was a chuckle over himself, which is doing okay in this day and age.

Winter chickadees are foraging and roosting now in flocks of up to twelve. Sometimes other small birds join them. In spring they’ll be pairing off to dig out chambers in decaying punky stumps of pine or birch. Sometimes they take over an old woodpecker nest and line it with plant down, feathers, fur, anything soft. Males and females make the nest together, work together to incubate the eggs and to raise the youngsters. They have several short songs, including “chicka-dee-dee-dee,” “spring...soon,” and a “peculiar lisping gargling that has a slightly musical quality.” (Forbush, 1926)

In 1904 John Burroughs invited some Vassar undergraduates to see a chickadee nest in a tree, to peer in at the bird and the hatchlings. One after another young woman took a turn at the peep hole until finally the birds had had enough and gave off an explosive hissing sound, the adult and the young all at once. The student jumped back, saying the birds had spit at her! Forbush tells us these combined vocal efforts have been likened to the hissing of some huge snake.

Back in the day, Frank Chapman was “rigid with emotion,” but any of us can have these adventures, joys, and Fadiman-style chuckles. All thanks to the “bird masterpiece beyond all praise.”

— Bonner McAllester