

## The Beauty of Nature during the Time of COVID-19

As a farmer's wife, I am grateful to be surrounded by nature daily because we actually live on the acreage we farm. And like all of us, COVID-19 has kept me at home more than usual.

I have always enjoyed working in the yard, and Monday afternoon May 4<sup>th</sup> was an exceptionally beautiful day. While I was pruning some bushes outside our bedroom window, a drab brown bird with a bright orange beak suddenly flew out of a pink azalea bush next to the holly bush I was pruning. I was startled as the bird was! Upon looking into the interior of the azalea, I saw a bird nest with three blue and white speckled eggs. I called to the bird whom I could see was sitting in a nearby maple tree: "Don't worry, mama; I won't bother your nest." I decided that I would not do any more pruning near that azalea.

I have never been much of a bird watcher, but this pandemic had made me slow down somewhat from my usual fast pace. Since I could open one of our bedroom windows and look right into that pink azalea, I decided to keep my eye on the soon-to-be mother bird. Several hours later, I looked out my bedroom window and saw that she was sitting on the nest. Since I was home more often than usual, I decided I would check on her several times each day.

Imagine my surprise on the morning of May 7<sup>th</sup> when I opened the bedroom window and saw that the eggs had hatched! All I could see was a mottled mix of gray feathers; it was unclear how many baby birds were actually alive. The mother bird was on a branch just an inch away from the nest. She chirped melodiously, and a bright red male cardinal suddenly appeared. So now I knew what kind of bird the mother and the baby birds were. I watched from my window, fascinated while the male dropped food (bugs) into the opened mouths of the baby birds. I counted three open mouths. I also saw the male cardinal next pass food to the female who then dropped it in the open mouths of the babies. After the babies were fed, the male cardinal flew away, and the female settled down on the nest. I watched her for a while, marveling how she could sit so still with those babies underneath her.

For the next few days, the mother bird would leave the nest from time to time, but she would always return. I never heard the babies make a sound, even when their mouths were open. Perhaps their voices were not able to be heard by humans as yet.

On May 12<sup>th</sup>, I saw both the male and the female cardinals come back and forth to the nest several times to feed those precious babies. All three opened their mouths wide to be fed. And today I could hear their faint cries. The mother bird was not sitting on the nest much now because the babies had grown so much larger. The next day, I did not see the male or female adult birds because I was not inside much that day. But I could tell that the babies were getting bigger and were spending most of the day sleeping.

On May 14<sup>th</sup>, my husband saw the male cardinal come check on the babies before 7 A.M. My patience was rewarded when, a little before 9 A.M., the female cardinal flew in and fed them. The babies still slept most of the day, but I did see one baby bird stir around a little after mother bird left. While I was outside that day, I carefully angled my cellphone toward the nest, careful not even to brush against it, and snapped a picture of this miracle of life I had witnessed so I could share it with my young grandchildren.

One baby actually popped up and looked at me with its mouth open. After I went back inside and was looking out the window, the mother bird flew back and appeared to actually “pose” for me on a branch of the azalea. The father bird flew back too, but he was not still long enough for me to take his picture.

On May 15th, the baby birds were moving around fluttering their wings with their eyes open. In the late afternoon, I watched the three baby birds carefully cleaning their feathers as if they were preparing for an event. And the event was – their first flight! They took off fluttering from the nest to some lower branches on the azalea bush with the mother bird flying and fluttering close by for encouragement. The father bird had positioned himself even lower in the bush to watch. I took a video with my cell phone as the baby birds made their first flight. What an amazing sight it was! How privileged I felt having experienced it! Two baby birds went back and perched on the side of the nest, while the other one stayed perfectly still on a lower branch of the azalea. I made a short, close up video of it by carefully angling my cellphone once again; mother bird was not too happy about my being that close to one of her babies. She fussed at me the entire time.

After May 15th, the mother, father, and baby birds never returned to the nest. But what a wonderful twelve days I had watching the cycle of life portrayed by these cardinals!