



6-15-2004

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Recommended Citation

Schulick, Barbi (2004) "The Pine Siskin," *Westview*: Vol. 23 : Iss. 2 , Article 7.
Available at: <https://dc.swosu.edu/westview/vol23/iss2/7>

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The Pine Siskin

by Barbi Schulick

When he was a small boy, my son Jeremy loved small creatures. He'd take joy in catching a cricket in his cupped hands, then make a show of letting it go, hopping when it hopped, following it into the tall grass until he lost sight of it. He traveled our yard with his head down, his big dark eyes hunting for anything moving at ground level. I was forever piercing holes in jar tops to supply airflow for his spiders and their prey. Soon he moved on to toads, and he had an eye for them—locating one hunched and brown among autumn leaves, scooping another out from the dirt behind the front steps. He kept two as pets: "Toader" and "Toaderette." When they peed in his palm, he'd yelp and toss them to the kitchen floor. I constructed a chicken wire cage for them in the backyard, digging it two feet under so they could hibernate for the winter.

When Jeremy was eight or nine, he discovered birds. I didn't fully witness his love for them emerging, didn't notice the first moment he marveled at a chickadee cracking a seed against a branch or caught sight of the flash of red inside a blackbird's wing. But more often, it seemed, his gaze focused upwards and out came the binoculars, field guides, birding journals.

Jeremy was a thin, slight boy with a shy sweetness that placed him barely on the edge of his grade school's in-crowd. His lack of competitive spirit confined him to the bench in Little League. He was one to do puzzles, to painstakingly sort and categorize his baseball cards, to read the Nintendo guideline booklet cover to cover, and to watch birds—for hours—outside the kitchen window, keeping track in his journal of how many goldfinch came at what time, whether they were male or female, whether there were babies, and describing how they scattered with the arrival of a blue jay.

I remember a spring when a flock of pine siskins frequented the feeders. Jeremy loved how

miniature they were, even smaller than juncos and chipping sparrows. The thin, brown-speckled wisps of their bodies balanced on legs slither than toothpicks. He longed to know them better, and so after school each day, he stood on the deck in front of the feeders, holding black oil sunflower seeds in his outstretched hand. At first his arrival sent dozens of birds away from the feeders and nearby bushes, flapping their tiny wings in alarmed retreat. But gradually the group swooped back, in what seemed a corporate decision to ignore the small human holding out seeds. Jeremy stayed put, applying his trademark patience, moving only to wave off a mosquito now and then. And I'd watch, wishing with a mother's fervor that a bird would come to him but never surprised that one didn't. Eventually I'd announce dinner, and he'd plod in, dragging his feet, vowing not to give up.

The afternoon the pine siskin perched on his hand, I was cooking something demanding: a sauce that mustn't boil, a stir-fry to constantly stir, food that should be eaten right away, and so, as I turned off the stove burners, I yelled: "Jeremy, come in now, it's dinner!"

Then setting the table in a flurry, I yelled again: "Jeremy. Dinner!"

And while pouring drinks: "Jeremy!"

"Quiet!" came an urgent whisper from behind me. I turned to find my husband staring out the glass swing set door at Jeremy on the deck. There, our little bird of a son was standing straight as a soldier, one thin arm shooting out at a perfect right angle. As if in salute, his palm was upturned, the long fingers flattened together to form a platform for a tiny, brown pine siskin that stood equally erect and looked back at him.

I studied Jeremy from the kitchen for those three, four, maybe five seconds, and although he appeared so still that even his breath was halted, I could detect a gentle tilt in his stance, his head and



torso reaching delicately towards the bird at the edge of his unmoving arm. It was a yielding that spoke of reverence, recognition, of the sort of hospitality a flower might offer a butterfly. He had become a place for a pine siskin to rest.

When the bird finally flew, Jeremy's breath shuddered through him, returning in a grateful rush. He turned to look at us. Sweat had formed on his upper lip, his cheeks were flaming, and I saw wisdom in his young eyes. Through the coming weeks,

he would describe over and over how it felt to be so close to the bird, to feel it buoyant, almost weightless, on his fingers. And though he'd try again to woo one, he'd never be successful, so that those few seconds with a pine siskin, his siskin, would be held in memory and heart, the way one remembers words from God issuing through a breeze.

