

Bird, Tree, and Me: Resolutions for the Climate Crisis

By Scott Hershberger

Honey Locust Tree

Welcome, my friend. As you move into your new apartment this auspicious August afternoon, I wave my fernlike leaves in the soft breeze. I stand fifty feet tall, with faint green moss climbing the seams of my trifurcating trunk. I spread my canopy over your roof, a steadfast presence outside your living room window. Whenever you need shade on a sweltering day, I will be here. Whenever you need reassurance on a frigid day, I will be here.

Eastern Wood-Pewee

Hi, friend! As you rise from slumber this serene spring day, I belt out my playful whistle. *Pee-u-wee! Pee-u-wee!* I'm diminutive in size, achromatic in hue. I make myself known to you through sound alone. I'm incessant yet ephemeral. For these few weeks, my melody will fill the air all day. The rest of the year, it will live in your memory.

Science Communicator, Me

Greetings, my friends. I am grateful for your presence, for your life-giving breath and your soul-filling music. I appreciate your beauty both perpetual and transitory.

I watch, I learn. I listen, I learn. We may not speak the same language, but we share something more fundamental.

What I learn from you gives me the resolve I need to face the years to come. When I met you, I already intended to dedicate my career to communicating about climate change. All the best climate science in the world, the best models, the best engineering, the best understanding of ecosystems—none of this is enough. We need effective communication to turn solutions *ideated* into solutions *realized*. But how can I make a difference when the problem is global and all-encompassing, an omnicrisis?

You are showing me how to play my part with a sense of purpose, without burning out, without losing perspective.

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You plan to live here for only two years, but I will spend my entire life in this one place. I have witnessed generations of

students and staff move in and out of the apartment that you now call yours, and I will witness many more after you. I track how this site has changed over the decades: I record the climate in my very core.

My kind is not native to this region you call Wisconsin. But I am adaptable, resolved to thrive wherever I find myself. If I were in an agricultural field, your kind would consider me invasive, a weed preventing you from extracting as much as you want from the Earth. But I was planted here intentionally by a landscaping crew. My greenery is a welcome companion to the stout brick buildings, the picnic tables, the sandbox. Your kind chose to take care of me, and in my own way, I take care of you.

I'm itinerant. I arrive in May and leave in October. Then I fly thousands of miles to a Peruvian forest you have never visited. My life is fleeting. You were already in your twenties when I was born, and I'll die long before you reach thirty.

I wasn't planted here. I chose to come. But I only had that choice thanks to the humans here before you. By restoring the forest by the lake, they created the habitat where I could thrive. Your kind indirectly took care of me. In my own way, I take care of you.

In recent years, I too have been transient, fluttering from one city to another partly by choice and partly out of necessity. In six years, I lived at fifteen addresses in five states and two countries. This lifestyle suited me at the time, helping me to quickly learn about the world like you must have done, Eastern Wood-Pewee.

But now, I resolve to become more like you, Honey Locust, finding a community where I can take root and build deep relationships through the decades to come. A community where, instead of parachuting in and creating more problems, I thoughtfully get to know my neighbors over time to learn what they need and how I can help.

The causes of climate change may be global, but many solutions are ultimately local. Every solar or wind farm must be located *somewhere*. In *some community*. Every regenerative agriculture project, every reimaged public transit system, every energy-efficient building requires local support and must be tailored to serve local needs.

I resolve to make a meaningful impact on a local scale rather than attempting a diffuse impact on a broad scale. I aim

to build community consensus by serving somewhere in that neglected interface between scientists and policymakers and residents.

I will follow this desire like you, Eastern Wood-Pewee, follow the magnet inside the Earth to the place where you belong. And once I find the place where I belong, I will bring to it the reciprocity that you have brought to my own life. I will take care of those, both human and nonhuman, who take care of me.

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I inhale your exhalation and exhale your inhalation, but your kind has artificially exhaled far beyond your numbers. My leaves cannot keep up with your machines, even if I transform light and air into life for a century or longer. Yet that does not make my effort futile.

I am not alone: I contain multitudes, and the multitude contains me. My leaves contain leaves, a community on every branch. And without each individual tree, there would be no forest.

I contribute to a larger endeavor, together with the oaks on the other side of the yard, the elms where the Eastern Wood-Pewee nests in the summer, the figs where he spends the winter. We all take care of the Earth; we all take care of you.

I sing for others of my kind. Not for you. Through my song, I resolve to find a partner and create a fledgling legacy that will outlive me. But that doesn't mean that my voice matters only to potential partners and rivals. It matters to you, too.

My song brings you joy, even though to your ears I sound identical to other Eastern Wood-Pewees. My feathered fellows hear the idiosyncrasies. And each of our voices is necessary to connect the generations.

In my daily life, I take care of the Earth in small ways. I eat legumes, not meat. I use metal silverware instead of plastic. I eschew cars in favor of my bicycle, traveling under the power of my own muscles rather than the toxic fumes of ancient lifeforms never meant to be reanimated.

I used to sometimes question the point of it all. What difference am I really making when factory farms continue devouring precious grains and water and disgorging methane, when plastic continues accumulating in landfills and oceans,

when global carbon emissions continue to ascend? When disinformation pollutes public discourse, when self-interest steamrolls the common good?

But you, Honey Locust, remind me that I am part of something greater than myself. People near and far, my close friends and those I will never meet—our tiny individual actions combine to create meaningful transformations. Our countless hands collectively shape systems and policies.

And you, Eastern Wood-Pewee, remind me that my choices ripple beyond the direct results that I see. Just as your song fills me with love that I spread to others, my conversation with a friend about climate change might lead to them having a conversation with *their* friend, and so on, gradually shifting social norms away from sickening our world and toward healing.

My writing, too, is not a shout into the void, but a dispatch through space and time to people I may never meet. One song will never reach all ears, but each ear can be reached by the song of someone.

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I know the importance of rest: when temperatures fall, so do my leaves. Rather than ceaselessly straining to produce external value when light is scarce and I am covered with snow, I use the winter to restore myself. By taking this time to conserve my energy, I begin again each spring with renewed vigor.

I am tempted to push forward at all costs. I tell myself that the climate crisis cannot wait, that it is too urgent to afford a break. But you, Honey Locust, show me that rest is essential, not a luxury. If I continuously barrel forward, starved for self-love and weighed down by impossible self-expectations, I will collapse.

I resolve to listen to my body, my spirit, my surroundings, and rest when they call for rest. The climate crisis is urgent, true—but its solutions require a decades-long cycle of action and rest, all of us counting on peers to stand up each time one of us needs to lie down.

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Your kind has studied birds assiduously. More than you have studied almost every other type of organism besides

yourselves. Yet there's so much that you humans do not know about my species. You do not know the intricacies of our metabolism or diseases. Our predators. How we die naturally. Our typical lifespan.

And next spring, my friend, if you hear an Eastern Wood-Pewee perched in a tree, you won't know if I have returned or if you are meeting another.

Thinking about you, Eastern Wood-Pewee, keeps me humble. You show me the world's expansiveness. You remind me that I will never know everything the Earth knows, that even the collective knowledge of humanity will forever be incomplete. I resolve to keep learning from you—and from all birds and trees.

And finally, I thank you both for your most important lesson. Hope is passive. The two of you are not. You reveal that balance will come only through action, but no single action is suitable for everyone. If you, Honey Locust, absorbed insects instead of light—or if you, Eastern Wood-Pewee, subsisted on light instead of insects—the world would fall even further out of balance. Just as you have found your niches, I will find mine.

May all inhabitants of our world resolve to use our strengths to each fill a climate action niche. Together, we can build a future in which all will thrive—bird and tree, land and sea, you and me.