

The Wonder App

By Theodore Dalrymple

We have had an outbreak of golden orioles at my house in France. There are, of course, far worse outbreaks to have, but it is a little frustrating that these beautiful birds (the male especially, the female is less beautiful) should be so shy and difficult to catch sight of. They hide in the tops of trees, and then fly off fast, in a kind of undulating flight, so that you do not get a clear view of them.



How do you know that they're there, then, cynics might ask? By the sound that they make, I reply. Are you, then, an expert in birdsong, you ask? Not at all, I reply, but a friend of mine arrived with an application on her telephone that recorded and then identified the song of birds. Instantaneously the answer came up, once it had recorded the fluting, liquid, almost bell-like sound, "golden oriole," with no room for possible

doubt.

I am not sure which is to be the more marveled at, the golden orioles' migration habits, or the telephone application. Like the cuckoo, the golden oriole spends three or four months in the northern hemisphere and then flies back to the southern hemisphere, as far as South Africa. Research, I presume by ringing, has shown that not only so they return to the same place each year (the oldest known oriole lived at least ten years), but with the same mate. I believe, incidentally, there is no gender fluidity *chez les loriots dorés*.

I confess that I find it difficult to imagine how such a pattern of migration can have evolved. Why go all the way to central Russia, as many orioles do, when they could surely find somewhere just as comfortable or convenient not so far away—assuming that their place in the south is their primary residence?

It is a marvelous telephone application. It doesn't just do birds. At night, in the oriole season, there has been a nocturnal *Bip! Bip! Bip!* sound emanating from just below the terrace. It isn't very loud, but it is distinct. The application came up with the answer at once: It was the sound of a midwife toad, the male of which species carries a string of spawn around it, fertilizes the eggs, and then lets them hatch in a small pond, where the tadpoles hibernate until spring. Actually, the midwife toad is classified as a frog, but is toad-like, with a warty skin than secretes a poison just like any old toad. The definitional difference between frogs and toads is in any case not entirely agreed, and indeed (according to the University of Michigan's website) "There is no scientific distinction between 'frogs' and 'toads,' although most [frogs and toads] are usually referred to as one or the other." Surely, there is corroboration here for those children who claim to be a cat or hedgehog, and who, therefore, have not done their homework. Who, after all, would be so foolish as to ask a cat or a hedgehog to hand in its

homework, least of all on time?

Supposing, though, that I had no telephone application and had not the faintest idea what made the midwife toad's sound. Suppose also that I knew nothing of the midwife toad's biology and could not just look it up casually. How long, and how much effort, would it take me to gather for myself the information in the above paragraph? What resources of patience, what determination, what practical intelligence, would it take?

I had not heard the midwife toad before. How would I have gone about finding the source of the sound? I imagine the creature is rather shy and would not welcome my intrusion. Besides, it was dark (the midwife toad is mainly active at night), and I daresay it would be unlikely to leap enthusiastically into the beam of a torch. And if, by some chance, I was lucky enough to find one, and it *Bip! Bip! Bipped!* in front of me, I should still know nothing of its biology and its life cycle.

That so much is known about it is surely a tribute to generations of patient and careful observers, who devoted themselves, and many hours, to finding out about it, for the sheer joy of knowledge and for the satisfaction of curiosity. Of course, some of them might have been impelled a little by the potential glory of being the first to discover something new and unknown about them, but such glory is hardly of the megalomaniacal variety that, for example, impels candidates to run for the presidency of the United States. If it is an ambition, it is an ambition of a harmless and indeed laudable kind.

Take any such animal as the midwife toad and you will find that as much is known of the former as of the latter. This represents a vast accumulation of knowledge, thanks to untold numbers of highly intelligent, patient, and devoted people. We take it all for granted, as if what is known has always been known and did not have to be discovered. And this attitude can lead us to a certain blasé pseudosophistication. *The midwife*

toad's tadpoles hibernate: So what? If it took people hours, days, weeks, months of careful observation to discover it, more fool them. Didn't they have anything better to do?

I observed the other day a red and black wasp, the *Sphex funerarius*, dragging its prey, a large green grasshopper, back to its nest in the outside wall of my study. The grasshopper was almost dead, but its long antennae waved a little feebly. I did not come to its rescue. It was soon completely dead, however.

A female sphex wasp paralyzes the grasshopper by three stings that correspond to the grasshopper's three neural centers. It takes the grasshopper back to the nest, where it lays an egg under the grasshopper's thorax, where the larva develops and eats the grasshopper.

Enough, I hear you say, of the beauties of nature! But this is not my point. It occurred to me that it would be a good exercise for children—intelligent ones, at least—to try to find out something for themselves about the humble creatures around them, without resorting to any kind of information online or in libraries, and without speaking to those who knew what they were trying to find out.

They would surely soon learn respect for knowledge and lose some of their exhibitionist disillusionment before they ever had any illusions. Pseudosophistication is a great temptation for, and enemy of, the young.

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