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Published in *The Christian Science Monitor*, June 22 1995

698 words

A Reverberant Woodpecker Sounds My Metal Chimney

I don't know where the woodpeckers went for the winter, but they've returned. Weeks ago, I saw flickers cross the meadow in their characteristic flight, curving rapidly upward, falling toward the ground, and curving upward again, as if riding invisible ocean waves.

I've been hearing their calls, "wicka-wicka-wicka," carrying across our part of Colorado's Rocky Mountains. I'm pleased to share the world with these enthusiastic birds, but I had forgotten, until this morning before daylight, that one among these brown, red, white, black, and gray, sharp-billed birds is a moralist out to refine my character.

As much as has been practical, I have been a night person. When we lived in northeastern Oregon, in a house with wood-fueled heat and no electricity, I stayed up most of every night through our coldest times to feed and monitor the stoves. I wrote through the quiet nights, when all in my family slept. I composed songs. I played my guitar and sang, softly to not wake my sleeping family. I went to bed at 4 or 5 in the morning, when Laura got up and took over keeping the fires burning hot against nights and mornings as cold as 40 below zero. I slept until 11 or 12. My wife and our daughters cooperated with me and my peculiar schedule.

Since we moved from Oregon, I've stayed up far into the night to write, to study, or to play my guitar and sing, when the next day's obligations were not against my late schedule. I work well in the quiet of the mountain night.

I've met a few people who expressed a moralistic attitude toward the hours I keep, some variation on, "Early to bed and early to rise makes a man healthy, wealthy, and wise."

Some people, it seems, think night people are inherently immoral, regardless of what they achieve during their late-night hours. That attitude never bothered me. I did what I did without concern for the disapprobation I sometimes heard about my hours of waking and sleeping.

Until I met this strong-billed, hard-headed fellow.

Over my bed, the living room fireplace extends its metallic chimney through the roof and into the forest sky.

Woodpeckers peck to obtain food. They also rap hard to create sound that carries far through the forest and impresses the females of the species with the power, the perseverance, and the worthiness of he who raps. Also, strength illustrated by loud rapping encourages other males not to try to intrude on the loud-rapper's territory.

As far as woodpeckers are concerned, he who raps on metal is heard far beyond he who raps on wood, particularly if the metal has hollowness, as for example, a metal chimney.

I suddenly sat up at daylight, far earlier than I wanted to finish dreaming, and said, "I forgot all about you in the months since you stopped your peculiar music, but I certainly remember you now."

When rapping for sound, the bird strikes hard 10 times or more a second and sustains the sound for several seconds. He stops for a moment to admire what he has created for the early-morning world and then gets back to work.

I never bother wildlife that does no damage. Last summer, I kept chasing away a flicker who rapped on the house's wood, because that did damage, until he decided it wasn't worth his effort to return. But the metal suffers no damage. Reinforcing my policy is the fact that I'm reluctant to dress and venture out that early.

Those who cannot be won over, one should join.

I will begin rising before daylight and study and write until the sun is high in the sky and the morning warms and I must venture into my day job of taking care of this ranch for the Girl Scouts of America. Then I can fully appreciate my friend's dawn concert through spring and early summer. After all, perhaps my small, fine-feathered moralist friend is right. In an automatically-heated house, worthy people do not lie slug-a-bed until late morning. I will have the opportunity to see if rising very early contributes positive development to my moral character as defined by my work.