

## Speaking Seagull

By Marianne Scott



I speak seagull. That form of bilingualism may surprise you, but it all began when we found a house near Victoria’s waterfront. Unexpectedly, birds—common, everyday kinds of birds—have formed an intimate part of our daily lives. These feathered friends—sparrows, starlings, gulls, crows, herons, eagles—have immeasurably added to our appreciation of the natural world. Their chirps, cries, caws, shrieks and twitters form our daily background music. They live in our roof tiles, bomb us with their guano, use our house as conference center.

We aren’t birders armed with binoculars while hunting exotic avians to add to our record-setting list. We just gaze out the window and watch winged creatures in action. The species exhibit characteristic behaviours that make them as recognizable as the opening notes of a Beethoven concerto. Eagles usually fly alone. Gulls lounge together on the roof but rarely take to the air in groups. Sparrows often dart in pairs. Starlings alight and soar away in huge speckled flocks—all at the same time. Lonely herons balance on kelp stipes to snatch a passing fish.

One morning, we heard a cacophony of high-pitched shrieks. A half-dozen gulls were airborne, their hooked yellow beaks agape. It was an early warning system as potent as an air raid siren: The eagle is coming. The king of birds was on the move from its nest on Discovery Island into town. The gulls raised the threat level to red, “a terrorist is on his way.”

We soon learned the eagle’s weapons of mass destruction lie in its lethal talons. One afternoon we observed the white-headed predator hunt a gull who, in spite of Spitfire-like evasive maneuvers, panicked and landed on the water. The eagle pounced, hauled up his prey and flew onto the rocks where, in a flurry of snowy feathers and scarlet blood, he showed us “nature, red in tooth and claw.” It was sad and mesmerizing. A mixture of gulls and crows alighted on the rocks, surrounded the butcher and sat petrified, silent, attending the funeral.

We’re now attuned to other seagull chat. Lying in bed in early morning, I warm to their conversations, listening as they cry softly to each other, as they cluck and purr. Yes, purr. It’s as if they’re saying, “Good morning everyone, it’s a nice day. And I’m alive.” My husband describing the multiple ways gulls talk, says, “I understand their different voices. I speak seagull too.”

Many people don’t like gulls, scorning them for scavenging. But people scavenge too—only their dead meat is swathed in Styrofoam and plastic wrap. I love the perfect way gulls fly and float, though their aerodynamic sense is not replicated on the ground. If I

toss some bread into the yard, they holler to their cousins and wing in en masse. Then they fight over the scraps following their own peculiar pecking order, flying at each other, squawking, “out of my way.” The noise alerts the crows who land on our deck railing, watch the shenanigans, waiting for their chance. They’re clever—while the dimwitted gulls are establishing dominance, the crows swoop in and steal the booty.

Our roof is tiled. At the corners, capstones leave convenient, oblong hollows. Families of sparrows have colonized them, living with us year around. In March, instinct calls and they start collecting grasses, threads and twine to reline their nests. Later we see pairs flying in and out—babies are being fed. Soon after, the gutters serve as flying lesson launching pads. The youngsters’ raggedy efforts make us chuckle.



When we first moved in, our roofing guy was eager to install anti-bird measures. “A steel cable across the rooftop will keep the gulls from landing and staining the red roof white,” he said. That strategy lasted one day until the birds figured out how to straddle the wire and hold it down. “I can put metal mesh under the tiles to keep the sparrows out,” the roofer added. “Their dropping dirty up your place and burn your porch paint.” It was all to no avail. A dozen smart sparrow families are permanent lodgers.

One day, a friend of ours, Kit Leung, noticed the birds fluttering at the corners of our dwelling. “Ah,” she said. “How fortunate you are. We Chinese believe that birds living in your house will bring you luck.” So we hose the deck and paint the porch steps regularly. And take all the luck we can get.