



Stags' Leap

ORIOLES IN THE LOQUAT

“Can any explanation for beauty be satisfactory?”

—David Rothenberg, *Why Birds Sing: A Journey into the Mystery of Bird Song*

If humans had syrinxes and orioles had larynxes, the birds renowned in their scientific family for song would be reduced to using two percent of their exhaled breath to produce music, while the humans in the exchange would find themselves with an embarrassment of air devoted to singing, and be able to trill two notes at the same time without having to master circular breathing.

The brightly colored Hooded Oriole, *Icterus cucullatus californicus*, has a fondness for dispensing its virtuoso performances across the Stags' Leap property due to plantings of ornamentals that have existed in this location so long they are now historic, even if they aren't native.*

Fan palms, *Washingtonia filifera*, are its preferred nesting material and more often than not its nesting site. Normally insect eaters, Hooded Orioles have adapted to the fairly recent innovation of hummingbird feeders, and can alternate nectar and insects, both of which are provided by the loquat tree, whose fruit ranges from tart, with almost an apricot tang on the tongue, to meltingly sweet.

The birds perform a service to their preferred loquat trees, which are vulnerable to insect damage. The festive orange-yellow bodies of male orioles can often be seen as they hop about in the branches, sometimes hanging upside down to get at a crawling snack.

Most of their singing is a gift in the service of love. During the spring months, when every bath of light is an encouragement to a bursting of new growth and fragrance, to be a female



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oriole means that your suitor might alight on a slender branch near you and make exaggerated bows as he slowly advances toward you. He will likely be one of several beaux, all of whom will be busy inventing wickedly witty insults for their rivals and squabbling amongst each other for your attention.

And when he croons for you, it will be a 360 degree surround-sound experience as your lover hops about you in the tree, offering his softest, most tender tones, at times lifting his open bill skyward in an ecstasy of longing, to which you cannot help but open your own bill in response.

After the singing has its desired effect comes the choosing and nesting and every satisfaction that follows. For the human visiting the body of an oriole, it would all feel like a blur compared to the relatively lengthy period of gestation to which we are accustomed. Woven in an intensity of three or four days, the pendulous nest is often sewn into the palm tree in such a way that the fronds become perfectly engineered screens from the heat and threat of predator eyes. The nest is lined with the soft down of vegetable fibers, yucca if available, along with a few feathers or a gathering of horsehair.

“The house is a bird’s very person,” Jules Michelet observed in his 1858 meditation on birds, *L’oiseau*, “...it is its form and its most immediate effort, I shall even say, its suffering. The result is only obtained by constantly repeated pressure of the breast. There is not one of those blades of grass that, in order to make it curve and hold the curve, has not been pressed on countless times by the bird’s breast, its heart, surely with difficulty in breathing, perhaps even with palpitations.”

Once our heroine’s nest is ready, egg laying happens daily and continues for four to six days. Incubation is just under two weeks, after which the young are fed by regurgitation (alas for our human adventurer). But their eyes open within four days, and they fledge within two weeks, and though still weak and requiring the dotting services of their parents for a time, the



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adult Hooded Orioles are likely to do it all over again, weaving and crafting an entirely new nest for their second clutch of the season.

This display is an annual gift of spring—the humans strolling in the gardens surrounding the Manor House, the birds appearing now and again from within the rich green leaves of the loquat. The fluidity of the oriole's song is always miraculously fresh and clear, something that can be heard endlessly without tiring. A visitor can drink in their swift and colorful flight and it will only awaken a thirst for more. Nothing satisfies. Instead, everything gains.

And even if there were nothing, it would be full of things, which is why we walk in gardens. In a garden, it is likely that a bird will alight on a nearby branch. Whatever story the mind is restlessly telling, it will finally conclude. A walk in the gardens encourages every story to have a satisfying ending, one that follows the subtle and beautiful aesthetic of the natural world. The bird doesn't require endings or beginnings. Its song is miraculous, escalating, shivering, something born anew and dying away each moment, leaving no record in the air. The notes lilt and cascade fresh as a sky's blue. The tiny throat throbs with its effort. And we are soothed and encouraged in our own flowering.

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*for a listing of the native plants of Stags' Leap Estate, its vine stock and naturalized exotic landscaping plants, including the plantings of the Winemaker's Apothecary and Sensory Garden, and the Moon Garden, see our website literature section: <http://www.stagsleap.com/art/literature.html> for the text of *Stags' Leap Winery: A Guide to the Estate, Volume IV: Cartography*

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