

# HUMAN NATURE: DIXIE'S ORIOLE

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Mimi, the naturalist at Cypress Hills Interprovincial Park, SK, phoned on an early spring day in 2016. She had received a phone call from Dan who lived on Vancouver Island, BC. His mother, Dixie, was terminally ill. Dixie was a keen birder, and one of the last things she wished to do was to take a birding road trip with the special objective of looking for a Baltimore Oriole. Dixie knew orioles but had not seen one since she had moved to BC, and now she especially wanted to see one again. Dan and Dixie planned the trip and concluded that the closest spot they were likely to find a Baltimore Oriole was in the Cypress Hills of Saskatchewan, and thus the phone call to Mimi.

On learning of the circumstances, Mimi wanted to do her best to arrange an oriole sighting for Dixie, but while she knew orioles and knew they were in the park, she didn't know their behaviour and movements well enough to be able to guide Dixie to a viewing. There is a lot of suitable habitat for orioles in the park, so where would one go?

My wife Margaret and I live on a creek close to the park and Mimi knew of our interest in birds, so she phoned us to see if we had any suggestions for oriole viewing. Our yard is well treed and our shelterbelts merge into the riparian trees growing along the adjacent creek, providing enough tall trees for good oriole habitat. Yes, there were orioles on our place that spring. They arrived as the cottonwood leaves started to flush and had been feeding on sap at the sapsucker holes in the upper branches where they were conspicuous. However, as the trees leafed out the birds become harder to see, and they spent less time sap-feeding as more food sources become available. The birds were there, but as spring progressed our sightings became more infrequent, and we were in the same position as Mimi — we knew there were orioles but were not confident about finding them on request. We didn't even know where they nested, although



A male Baltimore Oriole. Photo credit: Randy McCulloch.

we suspected it was in a patch of riverine aspen/maple woods we call The North Woods, about 100 metres away from the yard. Mimi thought that this might be a better spot to search for orioles than the Cypress Hills Park as the search area was small and better defined than in the park, and we had seen birds recently. Mimi phoned Dan about the situation, and he decided this would be the eastern-most point on their birding trip and the spot they would look for an oriole.

On June 3, Dixie and Dan arrived in Maple Creek where they spent the night. The next morning at 5:30, Mimi met them at their motel and guided them to our place, just before the sun shone into the valley. We had planned to take them to the North Woods site, but when Dixie got out of the car, we were shocked at how frail she was. She could walk only a few steps at a time then needed a rest, so Dan carried a chair along for her. The North Woods were impossible. Plan B, formed on the spot, was to take the shortest route to the creek where there was lawn and creek-side trees, and we could walk slowly and sit at spots along the bank.

The morning was perfect. It was calm and clear, with early spring coolness and dew on the grass. We walked and sat along the stream bank as the sun rose and its rays swept across the yard. There were birds — a thrasher, cat birds calling from the dense stream-side thickets, wrens, tree swallows, red-winged blackbirds and others — but no

orioles. By the time the sun was fully up and warming the air, we had reached a grove of cottonwood trees growing by a riffle at the outlet of a small dugout. On the east side of the trees, we found a spot in the sun where we could sit under the cottonwoods and monitor the pond and stream-side willows and the five of us sat down to watch and enjoy the warming sun. Suddenly, a male Baltimore Oriole appeared on an open branch two-to-three metres above Dixie's head. It sat there catching the bright morning sun, its breast fiery in the orange light of dawn and contrasting with the black head and wings. And then it began to sing, a series of repeated notes and broken phrases, perhaps unmelodic but delivered in a ragtime way by a flamboyant performer. We had no cell phones or cameras to distract attention from the wondrous display, which continued for several minutes before the bird disappeared into the foliage as quickly as it had appeared. Five delighted and bedazzled naturalists were left to mull over the good fortune, or the providence, which brought us and the bird together. We gathered on the patio for coffee and breakfast and to dry out our dew-wet pant cuffs, then said our goodbyes as we dispersed to our respective day's activities. Dixie and Dan started their return trip.

Dixie died shortly after returning home. Her wish was realized, and all involved were grateful and appreciative of the few moments Dixie's Oriole spent with us. 🐦