



Jonathan Franzen, Schriftsteller/Novelist, 63

Kalifornische Grundammer/California Towhee

It's nice to have a favorite bird, because when people ask „What's your favorite bird?“ I can say: „The California Towhee“. Almost no one outside the US has heard of the California Towhee, and when people look it up they see this incredibly dull looking brown bird and think I'm being silly. But it really is the best bird! Why? Well, I like small brown birds generally. And this one isn't as small as you might imagine from a picture: California Towhees belong to the North American sparrow family, but they aren't sparrow-sized. They're nearly the size of a European Jay – there's a lot of heft to them.

I love that I see a lot of them. Not a day goes by when I don't encounter a towhee. And you never see just one towhee, you always see two. The male and the female are always within ten meters of each other, and they're constantly calling: *Teek!* „Are you there?“ *Teek!* „I am here. Are you there?“ *Teek!* „Yes, I'm here!“ It's really uncommon to see a pair bond like that in the bird world. Monogamous birds are a small minority. Towhees mate for life, and once they're mated they're always together. When they're getting ready to breed, they sing duets, which again is pretty unusual. Typically it's just the male of the species who will sing.

The towhees have small territories and they're not very shy. You almost always see them on the ground, out in the open, near some bushes. If you come out of your house, they might retreat a little bit, but they're not impossible to see the way lots of little brown birds are. I can spot a towhee from two blocks away if it flies across the street, because they actually have a very distinctive shape. No other bird looks like it. The towhee is instantly recognizable.

Are these birds really so dull? Well, to the naked eye, yes. But if you look at them with binoculars, the plumage is subtly very beautiful: It's not flashy, it's not a Scarlet Macaw, but it has these subtle shades of brown, this very fine streaking on the cheeks and on the neck, and then a bit of peach-toned accent color on the undertail feathers. And their movements are also beautiful: They don't fly very much, and when they fly they fly low. They spend a lot of their time jumping back and forth, to stir up insects that might be in the grass and to uncover other little things to eat.

Towhees aren't aggressive or angry birds, they don't prey on other birds – they give the impression of leading the most peaceful of lives. They're essentially endemic to California, rarely found outside its borders, and California is where I really got into birds. To me, the California Towhee is the spirit of California.

I see it every day and I hear it all day long. It's a constant companion and it makes me happy. Hearing a towhee is like hearing a dear friend's voice in the backyard. I love birds, and to have a friend who's always there: That's the huge thing. If the California Towhee no longer existed, I'd miss it the way I'd miss a lifelong friend. But because they do very well in settled areas, and because they're not uncommon and are pretty immune to climate change, I don't worry about losing them permanently. I'll be gone long before the California Towhee disappears.