

GOING PLACES WITH RAMONA

By Melissa Favara

Pre-Ramona I usually only saw the sunrise if I'd waited up for it. Imagine what a Solid Citizen I felt like this morning at 6:45 am, parking the car with Ramona outside Mt. Tabor Park to take a walk and listen to morning birdsong.

Ramona unwittingly got me into birdwatching when she was two months old by liking to nurse down to her nap time at the hour that an odd woodpecker visited the telephone pole outside our bedroom window. One autumn afternoon I gazed over Ro's fuzzy head out the window, and the long-beaked beauty hoisted himself up, let out a piercing "wika wika wika," then gave the pole a few experimental nudges before winging away. The book we bought that week, *Birds of the Willamette Valley*, revealed our daily visitor to be a Northern flicker. We identified him by his song, bright red cheeks, impressive size and striped back with spotted breast (he never got the memo about not mixing patterns, but it works for woodpeckers).

The flicker ended up being a gateway drug for our whole family; we were to learn of an entire wild avian kingdom transpiring right here in our city, right under our noses.

For Christmas that year Ramona and I received a gift we enjoyed equally: a book of birds with sound recordings of their calls. Ramona still sits transfixed, pushing the buttons again and again to hear the music we now hear in the world since we know what to listen for: the trill of the song sparrow, the quiet "sip" of the tiny bushtits who flock the suet feeder we hung from the eaves, the gurgle of the Anna's hummingbird who sounds like a teenager sucking her teeth.

All along, this noise of life had been in the background, and I never heard it. This is one of many cases of Ramona's slowing me down enough to experience the world around me.

Ro notices birds before I do half the time – like the chipper little white-crowned sparrow outside her daycare last month: "Brown bird, Mommy!" This spring, we found a flicker living in a gaping hole pecked in a pole on Mississippi Avenue; we visit every day to see if he's home. When he is, Ramona waves up at the beak poking out of the dark circle and shouts, "Hi, Birdie!"

Though Ramona is only 22 months old now, I foresee a time when birding might be our bond. I like the idea of using this hobby to cultivate her love for the environment. The birds who thrive when we allow them habitat and clean air and water give the environment a chorus of chirping voices and a host of beaky little faces.

I learned much about our local flyers and how we can help them when I visited the Portland Audubon Society Web site to see what our local chapter offered for children. The volume of programs Audubon hosts for kids overwhelmed me: though there aren't programs for



Chapter 7: In which Ramona uncovers a magical avian world

toddlers, the slate of activities we have to look forward to impresses.

The children of Audubon Society members get free membership in the Junior Audubon Society and monthly invitations to all of the fun stuff they do, like building birdfeeders out of household materials, taking day trips to Oaks Bottom to observe wildlife, and accompanying education staff on overnight birding expeditions. Third-graders through adults can sign up to explore Oregon's ancient forests and hunt for pileated woodpeckers (think Woody). While I'm enjoying Ramona's toddler days, I'm anxious for her first Junior Audubon experiences.

Yearning for that birdwatching bond, I decided to bring Ro along for a couple of non-age specific Audubon experiences, given how much she loves pointing and saying, "tweet!" She loved the Audubon

cruise we took around Ross Island, and observed the fuzzy peregrine falcon chicks nestled under the Markham Bridge. Then she got bored and started cleaning the Sternwheeler's chairs with diaper wipes she swiped out of my purse.

This morning's guided birdsong walk in Mt. Tabor Park went well for 10 minutes. Joining the 20 or so "real" birders with their field glasses at the park's entrance, we told the nice Audubon man that we'd peel off if Ramona became a distraction. The damp, bright morning felt gentle, and we enjoyed hearing about the junco song and the surprisingly ornate song of the common house finch.

Then we passed a playground, which Ramona unfortunately noticed. It was five minutes later that I experienced this:

Tour Guide: "It's faint, but if you listen closely, you can hear –"
Ramona: "SLIDE! SLIDE! WANT SLIDE, MOMMY!!!"

We are not there yet. But this very morning when we came home, I made tea, and I held Ramona near the kitchen window while black-capped chickadees feasted on peanut butter that Ro and I had spread on pine cones and hung in our back yard. We studied their little black masks and their sunset-colored bellies. Ramona pointed, smiled, turned to me, and, familiar with the call of our frequent back yard visitors, said, "Little bird, Mommy! Dee-dee-dee!"

I love our bird life. It's an excuse to slow down, to take a walk, to look closely, to listen.

If you go:

The Portland Audubon Society offers an amazing range of year-round activities and classes for kids from 6 to 18. Visit their website at www.audubonportland.org/kids_parents.