

Earthsong for a Grebe

by Latifah Myerson

I'D like to tell you about an event in which I was involved a few years ago. It's sort of a true story, but then, it's really just what I remember about it, and I don't know much about what it is in a person that makes him aware of some things and not of others. I guess I'm just saying I'm sorry if all the parts of my story don't come together the way others might remember it. Forgive me for that.

It was January, 1971. We were living in Bolinas, a tiny community of hippies, artists, farmers, conservatives and 'summer folk'—all of whom shared a common wish, for different reasons, to 'get away from it all.' And Bolinas, located an hour's hard drive from anywhere else, was probably the last place in Northern California's Marin County to fit that description. The tiny ex-fishing village clung to the Pacific Coast with the tenacity of all the old sea captains who must have once lived there. It hardly noticed the giant eucalyptus trees that periodically gave way in the winter rainstorms to ooze down the bluffs to the beaches.



On this particular morning I was still in my nightie and just settling down for my cup of coffee. That's the one I get to drink after getting Lincoln out of the house to catch the school bus. But then the phone rang. Alan, who was calling from L.A., wanted a phone number on a piece of paper upstairs. Well, upstairs in our house meant going outside to get there. Since the call was long distance, and since I could see that it was one of those drippy-wet, foggy days that makes for cold noses and cold feet, and since I was still in my nightie and the heater had only begun to take the chill off the house, I dashed outside, up the steps and back down again as if I were in an

Olympic competition. It was only after I had hung up the phone that I remembered the air had smelled funny.

I threw a shawl around me and went back to the door and peered out. Couldn't see anything unusual; but then, with the fog, I couldn't see all that far anyway. I opened the door and stood there sniffing, my nose trying to recognise a vaguely familiar scent. Like the smell of a roof being tarred. Who'd tar a roof on a day like this? Fixing a road? Nobody here would allow them to fix a road. What then? I went to the front door and sniffed. Goodness, whatever it is, it's certainly all around. No sounds of machinery or trucks. Just the drip-drippings of mist collecting on the leaves and falling to other leaves—and Martha's tail thwomking on the deck. (Since I'd come out, my dog assumed I'd done so to pet her: something I wasn't about to do since she had gone galloping through mud puddles chasing the school bus and was still all goopy.)

'Oh, Martha. What's that funny smell?' I asked her.

Martha did a waggly circle dance and rolled over, delighted with some conversation. I decided to call my friend, Pearl.

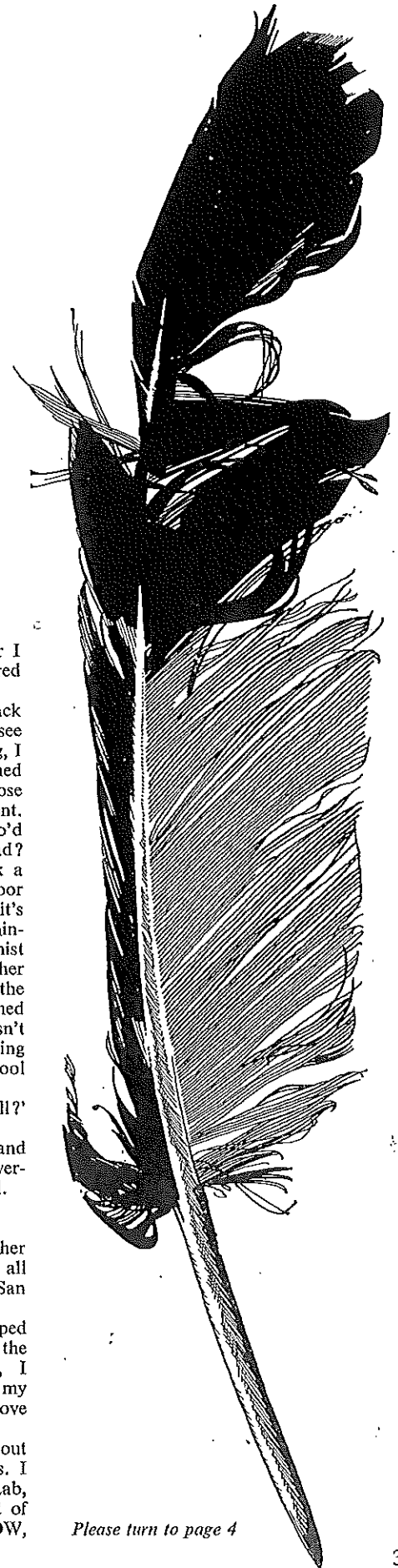
'It's an oil spill.'

'What?'

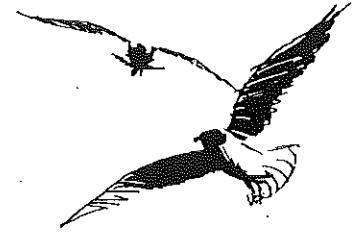
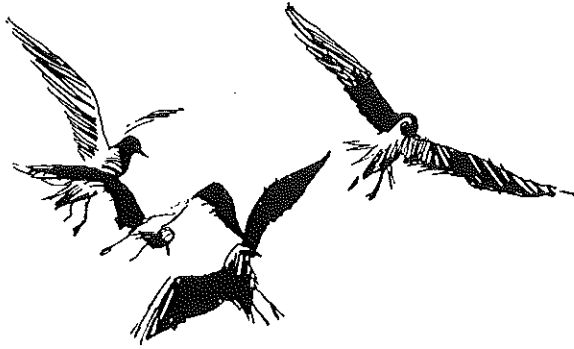
'Yes. An oil tanker crashed into another ship in the fog. Irving says there's oil all over the beaches and the whole San Francisco Bay...'

Pearl kept on talking, but I stopped hearing. I don't remember too clearly the next sequence of events. Somehow, I dressed in old, warm clothes, donned my rubber boots and windbreaker, and drove down the hill to the village.

All kinds of people were running about with boxes and towels and old sheets. I don't know why I went to the Marine Lab, but I did. It was fast becoming a sort of headquarters of WHAT TO DO NOW,



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A wave rolled up past my waist . . .

although nobody seemed all that sure of what to do now. At least, they had found the place where they could decide that, and besides, the lab had a phone. I started to go inside, but stopped to ask a guy at the door what was happening in there.

'They're cleaning birds,' he answered. 'Oh.'

I headed for the beach.

I don't know what it was I expected to see, or think, or feel. I'd heard about oil spills before. I'd made my share of 'thoughtful observations' about oil companies and the environment and all that. But those had been other places, other times. Now I was standing in it all.

I started walking. Others were walking, alone or in pairs, down the beach and into the fog. As far as I could see, the whole beach was littered with thick, black blobs of oil. Splotches of white sand were visible here and there, and walking was attempting to manoeuvre from splotch to splotch. I guess we were really looking for a place the oil hadn't reached, a place where it wasn't diseased, where we could holler: 'Hey, everybody, it's O.K. here!' But there wasn't a place like that. The sound of the sea was the same, but each wave coughed up more black phlegm, and the whole beach smelled like a giant crankcase.

My feet stopped at what looked like a piece of a jagged highway. I bent down to look more closely when an old jeep suddenly roared out of the fog. A couple of kids sat on the hood and held on to a pile of cardboard boxes, precariously wedged.

'Make way for the birds! Make way for the birds!' they shouted. 'Don't bother with the dead ones,' they bellowed as the jeep turned and headed off the beach. 'We gotta get the live ones now. There's lots more down by Duxbury. We gotta work fast.'

The jeep was gone.

I looked back down at my feet.

The bird was dead, its head bent into its neck and wings, all stuck together, pebbles and shells glued to its body—paved and discarded like some road-builder's mistake. Shock? Indignation? No, these were not my feelings. I don't know what I felt, but it was hollow and awful. Hey, God, what's happening?

I'd read a story, once, in the Qur'an, about Moses having to learn about patience. He'd had to witness people having

to suffer for apparently capricious reasons. Then, after he had witnessed all that, Moses was shown that what had appeared to be random and arbitrary injury to innocent persons had, in fact, been a mercy from Almighty God—a mercy, that had truly saved the lives of those persons. And at the end of the story, Moses was told how God knows that people aren't ordinarily able to understand, and they get frustrated and upset, but that God forgives them. The story was just a reminder to be patient, for sometimes, what appears to be terrible, is really a mercy, a blessing, from Almighty God.

A young girl, wearing old jeans and a bright, crocheted poncho, handed me a cardboard box and a torn piece of sheet. Her long, blonde hair blew across her face, and she kept pulling strands away from her mouth as she spoke.

'Wait for them to come to you. It'll only scare them if you go after them. When you get one, put him in the box and put the sheet around him so he can't see.'

'Thanks.'

'Sure. Sorry I don't have more boxes right now, but, you know, you do the best you can.'

Her hands were streaked with oil stains.

'The jeep'll come by and pick 'em up. They're doing the real cleaning over at the lab.'

'How're they coming? Do you know?'

'I don't know . . . it's terrible, isn't it?'

'Well, it doesn't look good.'

I headed out towards the reef.

I was standing thigh deep in the surf. The water had long since gone over and into my boots. Beside me was a kid in his early twenties who had been working this spot for over an hour, and had he stopped to notice how wet he was, he might have become very cold. We were both wading slowly further into the water, sheets in our hands, our eyes not moving from a small group of desperately bobbing birds. A wave rolled up past my waist and, suddenly, I was holding a very oily, but alive bird. We both seemed startled.

I sloshed out of the water and carried the bird to his box. No jeep in sight. I was surprised not to feel the cold or wetness, and as I emptied the water from my boots and put them back on again, I found myself unabashedly talking to the bird.

'Well, bird, it looks like you don't get a ride. So, if you don't mind, I'll carry you to the lab for a beauty treatment.'

Frankly, I was curious to see how the bird really looked underneath all that blackness.

The lab was in total confusion. Everyone seemed to have to holler to everyone else.

'Experts' in bird cleaning were arguing about the best methods to use. Corn meal, mineral oil, a new detergent. Who made the detergent? Never mind. Detergent will ruin the bird's natural oils. What did they do in Santa Barbara? Well, find out. Nobody knows. Nobody thought it would happen again. White mineral oil. That's what they used. Hey, here's another bird. Who needs a bird? Towels, rags, get some more. Not that way! This way!

All the while, over the din of the frightened people was the din of the frightened birds. Their cry was a sort of high-pitched, slightly nasal 'Aack, aack, aack, aack.' It didn't stop.

'Hey, Jessica!' my friend Paul called. 'You got your car here?'

'Yeah.'

'Can you take me home?' He came over to me and confided, 'I have to get out of here. I can't take much more of this.'

'O.K.'

'Hey, Paul.' A large man stopped him. 'You can't go. We need you. You're good.'

'I need some lunch,' Paul said. 'How about Jessica? She'd be good.'

'Have you done it before?' The man was looking at me, sizing me up.

'No.'

'O.K. But take him home first. And before you come back . . .'

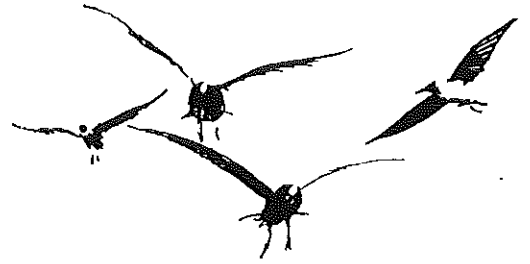
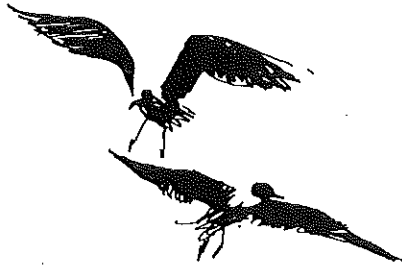
'Yes?'

The man laughed, 'Change your clothes.' 'Oh.' I'd forgotten I was all wet. 'Yes.'

'Reach down under the bird and loosen the oil with your hands,' Sue was telling me. 'You can feel when it's come clean.'

It was my first bird, and Sue, standing on the other side of the lab table, was my cleaning partner. I plunged my hands into the smooth, mineral oil until my hands felt the caked, stiff breast feathers. There was no softness. My fingers found their way to the bird's feet. Except for the feet, the bird felt like the barnacled bottom of a boat.

The feelings of guilt and shame returned.



suddenly I was holding a very oily, but alive, bird

I looked down at this bird, blindfolded, in a plastic dishpan of oil, our four hands sloshing liquid around it. Were we helping anything? Or would the bird rather be left the dignity of suffering in its own environment? Were we only adding to the bird's misery?

Something loosened in my fingers, and I felt the belly softness of the bird.

'It's coming out! The oil is coming off!' I was delighted.

'Yes,' Sue smiled. 'It'll come loose. It just takes patience.'

As we continued working, the whiteness of the bird's throat and breast emerged. Sue told me it was a grebe—a western grebe. Most of the birds caught in the oil were grebes. There were others—loons, auklets, golden eyes, scoters, murre. Sue told me about them and how to identify them. When she wasn't in college, Sue was usually in Bolinas at the local bird observatory, banding migratory birds. So, it was natural that she was now in the lab. I was glad she was my partner.

The grebe, when it isn't covered with oil, is a graceful, swan-like bird that lives almost entirely in the water. It has a long white throat and underparts, while the back of its neck, and top, is jet black. It has a black, crested cap and pale yellow bill, and sails elegantly through the water like some proud ship. The dead bird I'd seen on the shore and the live one I'd taken from the surf had both been grebes.

'Hey, grebe, how's that?'

We were done. It had taken a little over an hour. I had begun to feel encouraged, when Sue explained that this was only the first step. From here the bird would be taken to a recuperation centre where it could be watched and fed until it could be returned to the ocean. Nobody seemed to know how long that might take. Sue said they figured only ten to fifteen per cent of the birds would make it.

Sue and I worked the rest of the day together, our four hands becoming like one. We could do three or four birds in an hour, and we hardly spoke. I remembered that there was latihan that night, and Lincoln came in to tell me that he and Ben were going to catch oily birds. Lincoln was glad I was doing what I was doing and decided to spend the night with Ben so I could keep cleaning. So it was arranged.

At suppertime, Sue and a few others

came to my place for a bite, then stayed to relax a bit while I showered and changed for latihan. We agreed that we'd work through the night at the lab, and then, I took off for that crazy hour's drive to someplace else.

On the way, I went over the events of the day. The sadness came back. They're only birds, not people. Be grateful for that. But that's just it—they *are* only birds.

'Hey, Jessica! I bet you were cleaning birds all day today,' one of my sisters greeted me. 'When I heard the news I just knew you were right in the middle of it! How is it?'

What do you do? What do you say?

'It's hard,' I replied.

'Better be careful,' another sister teased, 'you'll have a bird latihan.' But then, she hastened to say she was just kidding me. 'I'm glad,' she added, 'you're able to do that.'

'Just so long as nobody sees my oily fingernails,' I joshed back.

I did experience, in the latihan, something about the nature of a bird and its closeness to God. I cannot testify to the ultimate truth of what I experienced—perhaps it was only the expression of my heart's wish—but it was my experience. I felt the bird's shape, its long neck arching upward, its bill, its song, its wings and its flight; and I felt it all as a worship of Almighty God. People, it seemed, had a choice: to worship God or not to worship Him. But the bird, God's creation, who sings at the dawn and soars in the skies, had no choice, its whole existence was a worship of God. And if a bird, through its obedience to God, suffers at the hands of man, or dies, in a way that causes even one man's heart to be touched—to remember God—then that bird is a noble creature and is with God. The suffering is with man.

Something peculiar happened when I got back to the lab. The first bird I cleaned—when my hands touched him—gave me this big, joyful feeling inside. And there's no way to prove this, but I was almost certain the bird felt the same thing. It was as if we shared some wonderful secret. The feeling didn't go away. Something changed in the room, too. It wasn't just that the system of cleaning the birds became efficient and orderly, or that the people became quiet. There was still just as much bustle and traffic. Everyone and everything had its

place, and the room got lighter. The birds stopped crying.

Outside the lab other 'miracles' were happening. The worst of the oil slick headed for the mouth of the Bolinas lagoon almost twelve hours after the first of the oil had covered the open beaches. The lagoon, one of the last natural estuaries in the state, was a refuge and breeding ground for hundreds of birds. If the slick got in there it would be a catastrophe.

The men of the town got together—long hairs, short hairs, potheads, boozers, red-necks and welfare recipients—and built a boom across the mouth of the lagoon. They built it with huge timbers and chains and ropes and beams. They worked like crazy because they had to get it done before the tide came in, and the tide was bringing in the slick. They worked by the light of torches and a bonfire. The oil people came to work with them. The local restaurant turned itself into a soup kitchen—free to all the workers. The boom was completed and stretched across the channel minutes before the tide came in. There was a big cheer. The boom was holding. The boom gave way, later on, after the danger had passed, and people rebuilt it before the next tide came in. But that was O.K. People knew they could do it. They'd become the boom team.

And there was another team that came together. The beach workers. They, too, had begun as an unlikely combination of individuals who suddenly found they were working together and enjoying it. Their work was, perhaps, the most painstaking. They clambered over all the rocky tide-pools on windy Agate Beach, with bales of hay and buckets. Then they would squat down and fill their pails with the oil-soaked straw until all the tiny rocks and crevices, homes to limpets and anemones, starfish and mussels, were clean. We all held our breath when a local marine biologist went to check on the health of a starfish who'd been in the same spot for several years. Apparently he'd survived. We all breathed a sigh of relief.

Inside the lab, we'd become so protective of our birds that we stopped permitting hungry reporters and TV newsmen in to watch. They were too unquiet in their feelings, and disturbed the birds too much. We'd even scouted the recuperation centres to which the birds were being sent, and

decided the best one was in Richmond and refused to allow 'our' birds to go anywhere else. We worked non-stop for about three days and nights, and the lightness never left the room.

On the third day Sue left to go help out in Richmond. I stayed on at the lab. Sometime in the afternoon I went out for a coffee break. There was a lot of talk about what had been happening and the way we'd all been working together. People were reminding themselves not to forget this experience, that maybe something good could come out of all this. Then, someone burst in with the news that the oil company was offering to pay \$5.00 an hour to people to help clean the beaches. No, they couldn't pay for the time you'd already put in. You had to go sign up. No, they wouldn't pay for the boom workers or the bird cleaners.

'Hey man,' the people said, 'we've been ripped off.'

I went back to the lab. It was still quiet in there. A young high school boy, whom I hadn't seen before, was working on a bird by himself. He asked if I wanted to help him and began to tell me what to do. He seemed so pleased to have someone to instruct, I didn't let on that I'd been there before.

'I hear they're going to start paying people to do this,' he mused.

'Not this,' I said, 'Just cleaning the beaches.'

'Good!' He looked up at me from across the table. 'I wouldn't want to do this for money, would you?'

'No.'

'I mean,' he went on, 'you should do this because you want to. Because you care about—about life, y' know?'

'Yeah.'

We worked together in silence for a bit. 'Y' know,' he started up, almost shyly,

'I'll tell you a little something I found out about doing this.'

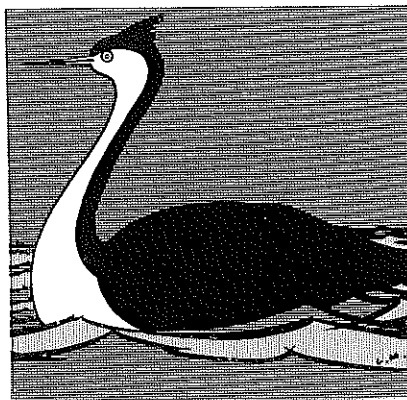
I looked up at him.

'I think the bird likes it better,' he confided, 'if you sort of sing while you're cleaning them. It doesn't have to be out loud or anything. You can sing inside like. Like that's what I do when I clean them, and they really respond. I sing.'

For the first time in a long while, I went home that night and slept. I stopped back in at the lab, but the bulk of our work had been finished. By the end of the week, they were preparing to dismantle the lab as a bird-cleaning station, and re-establish it as a marine biology lab. Lots of people were thronging about outside, talking of rip-offs and political action. There were lots of strangers who'd come long distances to earn five bucks an hour. A few, but only a few, expressed the wish not to forget the togetherness they'd experienced. I never saw my young high school friend again.

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Many months passed and many changes took place. In my life and in the com-



munity. A lot of old things began to give way and, sometimes, I couldn't see what might replace what was gone. Summer had come and gone, and it was winter again.

'Remember that oil spill that killed thousands of birds... ' I suddenly paid attention to the TV. They showed a young woman, perhaps in her twenties, standing by some rocks at the edge of the ocean. She was carrying a grebe. A very beautiful grebe. Some others walked along with her—friends, maybe—and some newsmen. Yes, she had been caring for the bird for several months now, waiting for it to grow new feathers. She and some others at a place in Richmond. Yes, this was the day.

She stooped down and gently set the grebe in the water. Then she stood up, stuffed her hands in her jacket pockets and watched. The grebe bobbed about for a moment, and then, in that crazy, wonderful way that water birds have of almost running across the top of the water, the bird began flapping his wide wings, stretching his long neck forward, and then soaring up, up, out over the ocean and into a very blue sky.

Where had they found this particular bird, did she know?

The girl was trying not to cry. 'Bolas,' she said, 'Bolas.'

'Hey, Mom,' Lincoln asked, 'was that one of the birds you cleaned?'

'I don't know, Lincoln. I don't know.'

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Do they not observe
The birds above them,
Spreading their wings
And folding them in?
None can uphold them
Except (God) Most Gracious:
Truly it is He
That watches over all things.

The Holy Qur'an, lxvii. 19.

How to clean an oily bird

WHEN the bird was brought in, he was given to a team of two people who cleaned his eyes, nostrils and bill. One held the bird, while the other person reached from behind the bird to hold its bill shut—with thumb and forefinger. This was to prevent the bird from pecking or jabbing with its long, pointed beak.

A small dab of antibiotic ointment was placed in the corner of the bird's eyes; when the bird blinked, the eyes became clean and protected. Then, a little strip of cotton cloth was tied over the eyes and head, like a tattered Mother Goose kerchief. (Besides protecting the eyes, the blindfold was intended to prevent the bird from becoming more frightened—at the sight of all the people.)

Then, the thumb and forefinger were used to hold the bill open while the other person cleaned oil from the bird's mouth and gullet. For this they used a Q tip dipped in mineral oil. A small dab of butter was placed in the mouth, the bill closed, and the bird made to swallow. The butter, hopefully, helped the bird rid himself of the oil he had ingested. Then, in the same manner, the bird's nostrils were cleaned. When all that was done, the bird was passed on to a second cleaning team.

This team bathed the bird in a basin of mineral oil and warm water (combined). It usually took two baths to clean a bird. The second bath was kept aside for the next bird's first bath. Then the bird was towelled dry, feather by feather, to prevent chill. Finally, the bird was given a fresh blindfold, placed in a fresh box—with

shredded newspapers in the bottom—inventoried, and stacked with other boxes waiting to go to the recuperation centres. (Yes, the boxes had air holes in them.)

Small vans carried the boxes to the other centres. In Richmond, some of the birds were re-cleaned with a special detergent.

Detergent had been avoided initially, to prevent harming the bird's natural oils. (These natural oils are what keep a bird waterproof and buoyant in water.) But the crude oil ruined this anyway, and the birds had to be kept until they could grow new feathers and their oil ducts returned to normal function.

They were kept in shallow pools—to allow them water for drinking and to prevent their feet from becoming painfully dried out, but not so deep that they might drown. They were fed fish regularly and, at the Richmond centre, were constantly played records of surf sounds.

I'm told the birds at Richmond had a 40 per cent survival rate—higher than all previous records—and I was also told that *all* the birds from Bolas that went to Richmond made it. I can't verify this. I know it was true for the first few weeks. I don't know about the long haul.

Curiously, the bird that had the greatest difficulty surviving was the loon. The loon is the only bird that exists today in the same way, shape, size, bone structure, as it did aeons ago. The bones of loons found in archaeological digs have the same structure as those of today.